

“Imitators of God”
August 11, 2024
Scripture: 1 Kings 19:4-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2

We find Elijah at the very lowest point in his life. Which is ironic because he has just had the greatest success of his career. Shortly before this scene under the broom tree, Elijah faced down the prophets of Baal and won. He destroyed their altar with fire from heaven, and then he destroyed them by slaughtering the lot of them. In hindsight that may have gone too far. He incurred the wrath of Ahab, the king and Ahab’s wife, Jezebel, whose prophets were killed. So Elijah decides he better split.

He’s on the run when we catch up with him and things are very bleak. He’s exhausted, he’s hungry and thirsty, and he’s beginning to doubt if this life as God’s prophet is really all it’s cracked up to be. Where has it got him, after all? He’s no better than anyone else; he knows this. And he’s had it: “Lord, this is enough! Let’s just end it right now.” And then he falls asleep.

We’re gonna leave him there for now. We’ll get back to him. Conflicts when cultures clash are inevitable. We see it in our own society. It often feels like we’re barely speaking the same language when political rivals argue with one another. And often those clashes become violent. Last week you may have seen the news from Britain about mobs attacking hotels where asylum seeking refugees are being housed. Those mobs have been fed misinformation about crimes committed by migrants. In fact, the earlier attack was committed by someone born in England, not a migrant. But because that person wasn’t ethnically English, all sorts of rumors began to fly and gullible people inclined toward violence were unleashed.

Similar things have happened in our country. We all know that. We live in a richly diverse society, but not everyone is comfortable with that. In a community like ours, where there is such diversity, it’s hard for some to accept the beliefs or lifestyles of people who are different. They seem to feel as though the very presence of other cultural practices is somehow a threat to their own. One of the exceptional traits about our country is there really isn’t a single American culture. What binds us isn’t our ethnic heritage. We’re bound by a set of values and ideas; things like equality and the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. These things aren’t dependent on ethnicity or religion or gender. So, all these different cultural practices have a place in our society. The challenge is learning to live in ways that make room for them, to accommodate one another.

That’s why I find these words from Ephesians so helpful. Here is a community that’s been called together and has to figure out to live with all the differences among them. I’m sure there were arguments and petty prejudices, all kinds of idiosyncrasies that caused conflicts. The writer, you’ll notice, doesn’t tell them never to get angry but to avoid being hurtful in their anger. And not to carry it with them into the next day so resentments build up. They’re told to put away bitterness, wrangling, wrath, and malice. Instead of trying to knock each other down, they’re told to work on building each other up. In essence, they’re encouraged to see one another in ways that appreciate the goodness that resides in each, to see past their differences.

In his book *Eager to Love: the Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi*, Father Richard Rohr explains what he calls “integration of the negative.” We’ve been taught for the most part that we

should be constantly striving for positive qualities while punishing ourselves for negative ones. What Francis teaches is learning to appreciate the negative within ourselves as a pathway to holiness. It's similar, I think, to Jesus' teaching when he says, "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye and ignore the log in your own eye?" By seeing ourselves as we truly are, warts and all, we can begin to live humbly and appreciate the goodness in others, in spite of their faults. One quote Rohr gives from Francis is "You can show your love for others by not wishing they were better Christians." Learning to accept others and love them, without trying to change them or "improve" them begins with acknowledging our own faults and loving ourselves, warts and all.

I think that's an important step toward becoming imitators of God, as the writer of Ephesians puts it. God's love for us isn't dependent on our becoming something other than what we are. God loves us for who we are, as we are. And learning to love others with that same generosity of spirit is how we imitate God in the world. But that love can have a transformative effect. There's a movie that came out years ago called "As Good as It Gets," with Helen Hunt and Jack Nicholson. Nicholson's character was a writer who had all sorts of neurotic issues and could be very abrasive with other people, pushing them away all the time. He struggled with mental illness and had medication that could help but didn't bother taking it. Until he meets this woman and they develop a relationship where she refuses to give up on him. No matter how really mean he is to her, she just hangs in there with him. One evening at dinner he tells her he's begun taking his meds and surprised, she asks him why. He says it's her fault. "You make me want to be a better person," he tells her.

Love can have that effect on us. When we accept that God loves us as we are, sometimes we're inspired to live up to that love. When we love each other in imitation of God, we all are transformed. We become new people in spite of ourselves. By being imitators of God for each other, we offer the world hope for something better.

I don't know why Elijah became so frightened after he'd had such devastating success. But I do think the violence he committed took him to a very dark place within himself. I can't help but wonder if that's why he was ready to die in that moment. I'm not interested in trying to justify Elijah's actions. There is a lot of violence in the Bible, much of it, I think, is metaphorical and shouldn't be taken literally. None of it, I believe, should be seen as an example to follow. But this scene in Elijah's life, as he lies in agony under the broom tree, does illustrate the effect of violence on our spirits.

Yet, even in this moment, in Elijah's deepest despair, God's love is not withdrawn. Elijah is fed and strengthened. God offers hope. That's not meant to excuse anything. The reality is we are capable of doing terrible things to one another. Even so, God's love for us remains. And if it didn't, if God's love were dependent on our actions, on our doing everything right, then what hope would any of us have? We're called to see beyond our differences, our faults, even our crimes, and love one another as imitators of God. Because we have received that love ourselves, if we're able to accept it, we're called to extend it to the world. Be imitators of God, loving others as God loves, and in the world's despair bring hope.

Amen