

Doubling Back

I Kings 17:8-16

June 6, 2010

York Center Church of the Brethren

Rev. Elaine Eachus

This morning let's double back, for we have completed the loop. We have worshiped together for nine weeks. Pastor Christy has had nine weeks to experience, ponder and discern her call as your pastor and we were given nine weeks, basically the season from Easter to Pentecost to learn, grow, ponder and discern this time God has given us, this Season of Joy, the living out of the glory and promise of Easter. Time's up! Let's double back and see what what has God been doing with us.

Let's begin by looking at our text this morning, you know Elijah, the Tishbite, the prophet, the one who said things that got the government, principally King Ahab and his pagan wife Jezebel with her prophets of Baal, really upset. You see, the people of Israel had a proud history. They had wanted a king, which you recall God didn't think was such a good idea but relented and Samuel had anointed Saul and then David king. People still buzzed about the glory days of their country when little Davy defeated the Philistine giant, Goliath, and then went on to give them a bigger and better kingdom when he united Judah and Israel into one strong kingdom. Those were the days!

It is now fifth dynasty and King Ahab, son of Omri, sits on the throne of Israel, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah have broken apart after Solomon, and King Ahab is really displeasing God. He ruled in Samaria for 22 years and Elijah is really annoying the kingdom by his constant shaking his finger at the godless practices of Ahab and Jezebel. He says God is going to get you with a drought. And drought it was, and God strongly suggested to Elijah that he get out of town. Those who shake fingers at the crown often upset the entire kingdom! He hightails it to a desert wadi to wait it out. God then sends him north to Sidon to a poor widow of Zaraheth. Now those familiar with stewardship campaigns in churches understand what God is doing. Fund raisers know that the poor give more proportionally than the wealthy, although it is easier to get a few big donors than the many less-well-off poor to reach the same goal.

Nevertheless he goes to her, asks for water, which she gives, and then makes a request that knocks her socks off. While you're at it, he says, give me that small crust of bread in your hand. I've been running and hiding from the king and I'm really hungry.

"Whoa, sonny," she says. "Water is one thing, I can get that for you from the well. You may be a prophet, but I am a poor widow with a son, and you know how poor widows have it in this society. I get no pension, Medicare doesn't cover my cost of medicine and the boy and I are at the brink of starvation. I've only got a little flour and oil. I'm out here gathering sticks to fix my son and me the last of our food. I have no idea how we will survive after that."

Elijah nods sympathetically as he listens and then makes an outrageous demand: "Make me a cake first, and then you and your boy can eat." Incredulity spreads across her wrinkled face.

"Here we are on the brink of starvation and you want first fruits. You sound like those TV evangelists," she cries. Was it the utter conviction of those who speak for

God? Was it her desperation, she had nothing to lose and perhaps could buy herself and her son a little time? Perhaps she could see God's one hand feeding the other, the widow feeds the prophet, the prophet helps the widow, but how? Maybe she wasn't as desperate as she claimed to be. She feeds the prophet, and lo and behold, just as Elijah said, the flour and oil didn't run out.

Another feel good story, another way those faithful to God's word thrive, or at least survive. Listen for the prophet, use your resources for God's purposes, and you will live. Amen. What a lot to think about. We should, like the widow, use what we have for what is pleasing to God. But this is the age of hidden camera, facebook revelations, reality shows and exposés. Let's double back and visit the widow a few weeks later. Her son is critically ill. She lashes out at Elijah.

Read I Kings 17:17-24

The widow has done her spiritual homework. Through her spiritual discipline of feeding Elijah, both she and her son have been fed. Spiritual practices teach spiritual graces. We can stand in God's time. But the emphasis is on the practice part. Nobody likes to hear that. We all want to be able to play that musical instrument perfectly. No kid likes to hear that she or he needs to practice more to make the team or move to the traveling team. Diets fail over and over again because the discipline of being faithful gets swallowed up, literally, in the neediness of emotional turmoil, over-committed schedules and cultural distractions that keep us from focusing on God's wholeness and well-being.

As just an athlete or musician must practice to reach a next level of performance, it is the practice of our faith that prepares us to take the next step in our journey. Had not the woman shared with Elijah she would not be ready to receive this truly amazing gift he had for her---the restoration of her son to life. It is the practice of our faith and sharing it with others that will prepare us to receive more grace than we can imagine. But first comes the preparation, discipline, and getting back on the program if we stray off the course. There is grace upon grace as we practice the faith. Practice is not done in a vacuum. The practice of the Christian faith is done in the context of the faith community. If a Christian practices his/her faith in the forest and no one knows about it, is it a Christian practice?

It is easy to get distracted and discouraged. Will we ever get to a place where our children receive the care and resources to grow into healthy citizens of our world? Will we ever learn to live in harmony with nature and not rape and plunder her for corporate gain? Will multi-national corporations ever be held accountable to pay taxes in the countries from whom they receive huge profits? Will the rich learn to live more simply so the poor can simply live? Our Christian faith is a shared faith. The stories of our faith, yours and mine, are the grist that feeds that feeds other Christians. We are starved for the Word of how other folks have found God working in their lives, how they are making connections that bring life to those who feel as if they are in spiritual desert. We watch hours of reality TV and yet probably have not shared a story of our faith, how God is moving in our lives in a long time. God stories show us how others find God at work in their lives. God stories give us courage to live and practice our faith.

We have celebrated the Season of Joy together, Easter to Pentecost and we tried to lift up ways our faith life celebrates, by strengthening each other's faith, as Peter

and Thomas grew in their faith after the resurrection. That faith trajectory comes straight to us struggling with our faith issues today. We celebrated our families, those precious and sometimes irritating parts of our lives that give us such deep meaning and such incredible opportunity to grow. We drew attention to our relationship with the earth as we brightened the corner of Luther and 14th Street. On Pentecost we celebrated God's gift of the Holy Spirit so we could go on, with passion and creativity to become a new community for God, a community that speaks a language that all around can understand.

Now we are in Pentecost, the teaching season of the church. Green is the color, the color of growth. Your pastor is returning to you. How will you share with her the growing edges of your faith journey? How will you grow with her into the season that God has given you? Lillian Daniel is the pastor of First Congregational United Church of Christ in Glen Ellyn. Her book, *Tell It Like It Is: Reclaiming the Practice of Testimony* addresses the need for us to double back on our faith lives, reflect and then share how God is working in our lives. If indeed, this beloved congregation feels God is calling to vital and life-changing ministries in this community, and people are hungering and thirsting like Elijah and the woman and her son for the water that takes away our thirst, then are we not called to find ways to offer that drink? Are we not called, like the widow to give the crust of bread in our hand so that those who are really hungry for God's saving word may feast on the Word? In giving away her crust, she gained the whole loaf of God's grace. We are called to double back on our experience together. We are called to reflect on what God is doing in our lives. We are called to share with others, in these times, that Thomas Paine said, try men's souls. We are those who reflect on their faith and share it with others. We are the carriers of the faith. And if not us, who, and if not now, when? Amen.