

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 10, 2008

Lessons: Psalm 85:8-13; 1 Kings 19:9-18; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT

A quiz. An early Sunday morning, when you least expect it, quiz. Are you ready?

Which of this morning's lessons apply most closely to your life experience on this, the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 2008? Which story of the life of faith seemed to speak to you right now, right where you are? And as we think about this quiz, we could probably add in the readings and commentary from the Forward Day By Day this week.

So let me ask you again: Which of this morning's lessons, or from the Forward, apply most closely to your life experience on this, the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 2008? Which story of the life of faith seemed to speak to you right now, right where you are?

Seven days ago we reminded ourselves that we are in the Season of Pentecost, the season of the Church year where we really focus on being and living as Christ's disciples today. Not two thousand years ago, but today, in 2008. And we acknowledged that at our baptisms we, like the disciples and Apostles before us, have been empowered to share Christ's love and reconciliation with our world. And this week we have prayed, and asked to be shown where we could be "Instruments of Peace"; and we have asked to be shown where we could plant just one small mustard seed that would aid in the spread of God's Kingdom, or where we could mix one small amount of leaven in the dough of life where we live.

And so we left church last Sunday open and willing to be Christ's disciples in the world today. We left church open to what we might be shown or asked to do. So what did we experience?

I would guess that there is a pretty good chance that we each acknowledged that we really ought to be living as Christ's disciples and trying to put our faith into practice. But I would also bet that there is a pretty good chance that we each had a question or two as to what we should do and perhaps, what we really could do. And we may have even wondered if we were qualified to do what we might be asked to do. We just might have had a couple of doubts. Did we?

And then along came Monday morning and the reading and commentary on Gideon from Judges, chapter 6. Remember that Gideon has been asked by God to do something. He has been asked to lead an army against the Midianites, and he is clearly hesitant. Listen to the words of the commentator. He wrote:

*“Gideon is a squeamish, cowardly young man. When an angel of the Lord addresses him as a ‘mighty warrior’ and commissions him to lead an army to rout the Midianite marauders, Gideon adopts a ‘Who? Me?’ attitude, stammering, ‘But, but, but...’ Gideon twice seeks to test the authenticity of this assignment. First he lays a piece of wool on the ground and asks the Lord to drench it with water overnight while leaving the surrounding ground dry. The Lord complies, but Gideon remains unconvinced—it could have been a coincidence. The next night Gideon asks for the opposite, a dry fleece and wet ground. This done, he unenthusiastically sets about planning his attack...*

*“It will require no stretch of the imagination for many of us to see ourselves in Gideon. Is someone to visit the sick? Feed the hungry? Speak a word of hope to the downcast? Lead a campaign to right some grievous wrong? ‘Who? Me?’ Yes, you. ‘But, but, but...’*

Are we a little hesitant to respond to what God is calling us to do? Are we a little unsure of what we are able to do or perhaps even how to do what is being asked of us? Listen to what happens in our story of Gideon. The author writes:

*“The story of Gideon continues. Our reluctant hero rouses thirty-two thousand troops to drive out the Midianites. But that’s too many, the Lord says. Fewer soldiers, please. So Gideon dismisses most of his army. Still too many, the Lord says. So Gideon dismisses all but three hundred men. It is with this tiny force that the Lord will defeat the Midianite horde. Moreover, he will do it not with swords or bows and arrows, but with—the Lord is kidding, right?—trumpets, torches, and empty jars.*

*“Sometimes it takes an absurd event for us to acknowledge that it is God’s power and not our own that delivers us from peril. Like Gideon, we first shy away from doing anything, hoping things will get better on their own. Then we do the opposite, amassing every ally and warrior we can find to empower us to defeat our enemy. In the end, though, it is not we who act, but the Lord who acts on our behalf. We are not to sit passively by—Gideon had to do something—but neither are we to trust our own resources. Our power, skills, equipment, intelligence, force of will, and determination do not determine the day. God determines the day, sometimes with us, sometimes without us, sometimes despite us.”*

So now, let’s assume that we have overcome our fears or our hesitation, and we really have become “Instruments of Peace”. Let’s assume that we are actively involved in spreading God’s Kingdom by planting lots of mustard seeds and working a lot of leaven into the dough of our lives. What might we expect as we strive to be Jesus’ disciples in our world today?

Let’s look at the Prophet Elijah. When we meet him today, he is discouraged and hiding in a cave. He has been running for his life from a queen that wants to kill him. He has become so discouraged that just a few days earlier he said: *“It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life...”* Clearly Elijah is discouraged and fearful. When the Lord asks: *“What are you doing here Elijah?”* Elijah answered: *“I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your*

*alter, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”*

But before all of these things happened to Elijah, do you remember what he had been doing...doing for God? This is important for each of us to keep in mind, because Elijah was committed to God and had been doing what he was called to do, even though in his case there was great danger involved. And he had been very successful. He had foretold the end of a three year drought. He had defied the prophets of Baal and saw fire from heaven consume offering and altar in response to a single prayer, he had revived a widow's child, told off a king and got away with it and he had outrun a chariot. Things had been going well for Elijah and he could probably feel that God was with him.

Then suddenly, unexpectedly, things changed. Suddenly Elijah felt that he was alone and everything was up to him, and he ran for his life. He ran to the cave. And when things don't go well for us, when everything seems to go wrong, don't we feel and do the same? Don't we feel that we are alone and that everything depends on us? Don't we want to go into a cave, perhaps an emotional cave, to withdraw from our situation, our commitment to God?

But when we withdraw to our cave, remember God's question to Elijah. Remember God's words. Remember what he said and then hear the words addressed to you: *“What are you doing here Elijah?”* *“What are you doing **here?**”* Not what are you doing ***there?***

Author John Ortberg wrote:

*“God was with Elijah in the cave...I wonder whether Elijah was surprised by this. In times of great success it is not hard to believe that God is present...But I think perhaps that the cave is the most wonderful place of all to find that you are loved by God. If you know—really know—that you are loved by God when you feel the weight of failure, then there is no place where you will be beyond the confines of his care.”*

As we leave church today, as we continue seeking to be Christ's disciples today, in the world where we live, as we continue to seek opportunities to be “Instruments of Peace” and to plant mustard seeds and provide leaven to the dough of our lives, remember what we have thought about today.

Remember Gideon and remember Elijah, and remember what we just heard:

*“In the end... it is not we who act, but the Lord who acts on our behalf. We are not to sit passively by—Gideon had to do something—but neither are we to trust our own resources. Our power, skills, equipment, intelligence, force of will, and determination do not determine the day. God determines the day, sometimes with us, sometimes without us, sometimes despite us.”* *God determines the day.*

And when things do not go as well as we had hoped and we become discouraged, remember:

*“that the cave is the most wonderful place of all to find that you are loved by God. If you know—really know—that you are loved by God when you feel the weight of failure, then there is no place where you will be beyond the confines of his care.”*

Remember Gideon. Remember Elijah. And remember God. Remember God and trust God. And then continue on, being “Instrument of Peace.”

AMEN