

The St. John's Pulpit

St. John's Baptist Church 300 Hawthorne Lane Charlotte, NC 28204
704.333.5428 www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org

LIMPING WITH TWO OPINIONS

1 Kings 18:17-21 and Luke 7:1-10

Second Sunday after Pentecost, May 29, 2016
The Rev. Dennis W. Foust, PhD, Senior Minister



“Often when you think you’re at the end of something, you’re at the beginning of something else.”

A few months ago, I enjoyed a conversation with a person who realized she was committed to several good causes, but thoroughly uninvolved in the core mission of Christ’s Church in the world. She spoke of her need to connect her work in the world with her life in Christ. During our conversation, we used the term, ‘cultural religion’ to describe what happens when a person becomes overly committed to good causes which are affirmed by others in our culture, but which are disconnected from your relationship with God. We discussed the meaning of ‘Active Servant Faith’ and how it renews your life as a practitioner or learner of the Way of Jesus. She thought she was at the end of something, but she was at the beginning something else.

Can you identify with this woman? Is commitment so easy for you that you have become overly committed? Friends, you can become committed to so many causes, organizations, concerns and interests that you suffer from multiple commitment disorder. This morning, we consider two biblical stories which confront today’s shallow cultural religion.

First, Elijah’s show down on Mt. Carmel with the 850 prophets of Ba’al and Asherah.

When Ahab, King of Israel, married Jezebel, daughter of the King of Sidon, Ahab chose to worship the Sidonian god and goddess, Ba’al and Asherah. As Israelites continued to go through the motions of worshipping YHWH, observing their culture, theirs was not a Theocentric or spiritual commitment. Not wanting to disappoint their King, however, they also practiced cultural worship toward Ba’al and Asherah. In Elijah’s language, they were limping with two opinions. They were hedging their bets. And, by trying to follow Ba’al, Ashterah and YHWH, they were committed to neither. In the midst of a drought, Elijah flooded the altar with water and YHWH lighted the altar with fire. Those people were like people of faith throughout the ages. They refused to chart their course by the will of God and started drifting without direction because of a lack of deep commitment in relationship with God.

Every generation chooses between authentic and deep commitment to The Living God and shallow expressions of cultural religion. Of course, most people do not mean to become cultural religionists. People just find it easy to drift in the direction of offering to God worship that is, in their minds, ‘good enough.’ So, this story is a reminder of what we already know to be true.

Tucked inside this story of Elijah is an indicator of how cultural religion expresses itself. Through this story, Elijah is responding to the Lord's leadership. But, when Elijah annihilates the 850 prophets of Ba'al and Asherah, he is not doing so in obedience to the word of the Lord. He is motivated by culture, not by God. In fairness to Elijah, he did not have Jesus' revelation of God at his disposal. Yet, today, many people say they follow Jesus while working against the very nature of God and Jesus' definition of the kingdom of God by extending ungodly and un-Christ-like practices of culture through actions of intolerance and violence. When you hear someone claim to be obeying God or following Jesus while using language of intolerance, hate, retribution and violence, you are in the presence of a cultural religionist.

AS FOLLOWERS OF THE JESUS WAY, WE INFLUENCE OUR CULTURE WITH THE NATURE OF GOD AS REVEALED IN JESUS. To do anything less trivializes Jesus and blasphemes The Living God.

Jesus refused to use a language of violence. He practiced non-violence and taught forgiveness and grace. After one of Jesus' disciples cut an ear off a guard at his arrest, Jesus returned the guard's ear and said to his disciple, "*Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword*" (Matthew 26:52). People do not begin with violence; they begin with fear and bias because they are invested in dominance. Eventually, their refusal to be a servant, because they must dominate, moves them to intolerance and violence. In his book, *When Religion Becomes Evil*, Charles Kimball identifies these persons as claiming absolute truth, proclaiming the ends justify the means, and refusing to relate with people who do not look like them, think like them, worship like them or speak like them. However, when we allow the nature of God, as revealed in Jesus, to motivate us, we do not limp with two opinions.

Second, Jesus' and the Roman Centurion.

Did you notice in this story that Jesus and the Roman Centurion never met. The Centurion was a Gentile, not a Jew. He sent elders to Jesus on behalf of a slave whom he highly valued. The elders approached Jesus explaining that the Centurion was worthy of this healing because he financed the construction of the synagogue in Capernaum. They were seeing bartering and Jesus was seeing faith. In fact, Jesus affirmed this Centurion for expressing more faith than any Jewish person he had met in all of Israel. The Centurion would have been charged with blasphemy if he did not bow before Caesar. Yet, Jesus did not condemn him as one who was limping with two opinions. Jesus affirmed him.

Our current culture tells us that faith is about orthodoxy; having your doctrines in right order. For Jesus, faith was not orthodoxy; faith was orthopraxy. If orthodoxy is right thinking, orthopraxy is right living. Jesus taught active servant faith by saying, "*Turn your other cheek.*" "*Love your enemies.*" "*Pray for those who persecute you.*" Jesus taught us to pray, "*...Forgive us our trespasses in direct proportion to how we forgive those who trespass against us.*"

We follow Jesus and refuse to limp with two different opinions about God. No matter what cultural religion tells us, God is not in the retribution business or the violence business. God is in the compassion business, the forgiveness business, the reconciliation and redemptive business. God is in the active servant faith business.

On this Memorial Day weekend, we remember those who gave their lives during war for the purposes of peace and freedom. They made investments in God's kingdom of peace. Last week, as President Obama visited Hiroshima, 70 years after bombs devastated lives, he said, *"Death fell from the sky and the world was changed...The flash of light and a wall of fire destroyed a city demonstrating that mankind possessed the means to destroy itself. We force ourselves to feel the dread of children confused by what they see. We listen to a silent cry."*

There is a Cherokee proverb: *"Pay attention to the whispers, so we won't have to listen to the screams."*

Cultural religion offers angry screaming as a common language. Whispers and silent cries seem to go unheard. Yet, in your relationship with The Living God, as revealed in Jesus Christ, you experience a different way of seeing. You express an active servant faith in the world that is spiritually transformational, reconciling and redemptive in light of the risen Jesus. Your work in the world is connected to your relationship with God, your worship of God.

One of the most influential television personalities in history was Fred Rogers. Mister Rogers never limped with two different opinions. He was not covered by the tabloids because he offered no sleazy stories or moral failures. He was married to Joanne for 51 years, father of two sons and grandfather of 3 boys. He was honored with more than 40 honorary degrees, a Life Achievement Award from the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences and a Presidential Medal of Freedom. For 33 years, from 1968 until 2001, he encouraged children to realize they were special. He taught them how to be thoughtful, sensitive, kind, curious and imaginative. He used his bachelor's degree in music composition to write more than 200 songs. He wrote books, completed a master's degree in theology, was an ordained Presbyterian minister and studied at The University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School for Child Development.

In the 1980s, after terrorist attacks in France, John Lennon being shot in New York, President Reagan and Jim Brady being shot in Washington, the Pope being shot in Rome and young people in Atlanta and elsewhere turning up missing, Mister Rogers realized the nation's children were living in fear and parents needed help. So, he recorded a program where he talked about sad and scary things saying, *"You have the right to be angry. But, you must find constructive things to do with your angry feelings...There are people in the world who are so sick or so angry that they sometimes hurt other people..."*

Followers of Jesus, you are not limping with two opinions. You follow Jesus doing constructive things with your angry feelings. You avoid cultural religion. You practice active servant faith in a world of fear, bias, anger, violence and pain. You go forth in a violent world bearing witness of God's hope and peace. You avoid being overly committed in shallow ways.

Some people suggest cynicism, harshness and retribution have the last word. Yet, wherever you incarnate the peace and hope of the risen Christ, it is as if The Living God lights a fire on a wet altar. To quote Mister Rogers, *"Often when you think you're at the end of something, you're at the beginning of something else."* Amen and AMEN!