LIMPING BETWEEN TWO OPINIONS

Scripture Lessons: 1 Kings 18:17-40
Joshua 24:14-18
Luke 16:10-13

Elijah then came near to all the people and said, “How long will you go limping between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him, but if Baal, then follow him.” (1 Kings 18:21)

Last week, as we celebrated the nineteen anniversary of my call to be the pastor of this church, we renewed our covenant with each other and with this church. As Jim Holmes, our church historian has pointed out, I have the longest pastorate in the 152-year history of this church. It is also my longest pastorate in my 47 years of ordained ministry.

This morning we celebrated another anniversary. Fifty years ago Bob L’Heureux and David Sickles became members of this church. When we reflect on not only what Bob and David do in this church today but also on all the contributions they have made to our church over the past fifty years, we have another example of how deeply we are shaped by commitment.

A few months ago in a sermon on shaping our soul, I noted that our soul is shaped most deeply in three ways. It is shaped by what we love, with which we struggle, and to which we are committed. As I noted, our marriages, our parenting, our relationship with God and also our relationship with the church not uncommonly fall into all three of these categories.

I don’t usually choose a text from the Old Testament for our scripture lesson. However, the ancient Israelites knew something about commitment, about their fear of commitment, about the ambivalence that can place us one-foot-in and one-foot out of something that demands our wholehearted devotion.

At the time of the first scripture reading, during the reign of King Ahab, the Israelites were troubled and confused. They had just begun to establish themselves as a people and a religion. They were in a new land, the land of Canaan, which they had only recently conquered. They were living in a different culture, elements of which influenced them very strongly.

The Israelites adopted a good portion of the Canaanite style of life: their legal system, their local customs, and agricultural practices into their own culture. Of special significance, however, was the tension the Israelites experienced between their religion and the religious customs and practices of the land, especially those of the most prominent religion, Baalism.
Baalism was the worship of the god Baal. Baal was a fertility god, a nature god who died in the summer and was born again at the winter solstice. His worship was a declaration of faith in the providence of nature and in the Canaanites’ ability to influence the course of nature by ritual and magic. The influence of Baalism on the Israelites’ religion is evidenced by the Baal myths that were later written into the Bible. The most notable of these is our creation story.

In adapting to the new culture, the Israelites were in danger of losing the uniqueness of their faith. Joshua and Elijah were afraid that they would turn their backs on the Lord God Yahweh who had spoken to them through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who freed them from slavery in Egypt, and who promised them a great destiny if they would worship Him.

At this time in their history, the Israelites were struggling to establish their identity. The newly won territory, both in Canaan and in the minds and the hearts of the Israelites was ground stolen from a very powerful enemy. The Israelites were always in danger of being conquered by external enemies, but even more dangerous was the possibility that they would forget their religion and be assimilated into the prevailing religion of Canaan.

As we heard this morning, the Israelites were confused. They were standing at the crossroads between Baalism, which represented one side of their nature, and the worship of the Lord God Yahweh, which represented the other side. Baalism represented a return to the nature religion of the past, while the Lord God Yahweh represented a future built around a unique identity for the nation and for the religious development of each individual.

In his contest with the priests of Baal Elijah presents his people with a choice: either worship Yahweh or worship Baal. He tells them that as long as they hold back from making this decision, as long as they remain ambivalent, they are only hurting themselves.

Elijah understood the power of Baalism, limited though it was in its ability to speak to the human situation, but he also knew the power that comes from the worship of Yahweh. His people were neither in one camp or the other. Most likely they worshipped Baal when it was in their best interests to do so, e.g., around seed time and harvest, and the Lord God the rest of the year. Or perhaps Baal got six days of the week, with the seventh being reserved for Yahweh.

Elijah uses a metaphor to describe the situation and to prod his people into deciding. He asks them, "How long will you go limping between two opinions?" Until you choose where you will stand you are facing life with one-half the resources at your disposal. You are like a traveler
unable to decide which path to take. Elijah challenges his people to make a commitment, just as Jesus did many years later when he said, "No person can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will hold to the one and despise the other."

Our scripture lessons this morning lead us to reflect on the age-old problem of ambivalence. In describing the indecisive person as "limping between two opinions," Elijah draws attention to this condition as an insidious crippler of human potential.

To procrastinate, to delay important matters to a “more convenient time” is one of our deep-seated tendencies. It has been said that the attics of our minds are filled with the relics of deferred decisions. In the serious business of living, our inability to decide can be a torment to us and to those who suffer from the consequences of our procrastination.

Ambivalence can be a factor in marital difficulties. Most marriages pass through difficult times because of external causes, because of what is happening or not happening between the partners, or because of what is happening within one or both of the partners. The situation is exacerbated, however, when one of the partners can't decide whether to commit to the marriage or not, whether to put both feet in and see the troubles through or leave and build a new life somewhere else. Ambivalence makes a healthy resolution of the marital problems impossible.

On a personal and also a national level, one of the major issues in ambivalence is the matter of paying a price. We need to be as clear as we can about the price of certain actions or interventions. We also need to be as clear as we can about the price that will be paid if we don’t act, if we don’t intervene in certain situations.

Jesus said no one should build something without first becoming aware of the cost. If you decide to leave a bad marriage, there is a price that will be paid by you, by your spouse, and by your children. However, there is also a price that will be paid if you don’t leave. It is prudent to be aware of the price that not only but also others pay for our decisions. It is also prudent to be aware of the price that not only we but also others pay for our lingering non-decision.

Ambivalence is often grounded in the search for the option that involves no price. Actions have consequences, but non-action has consequences as well. There is a price for everything. Sometimes we are ambivalent because we have not thought the matter through. At other times we are ambivalent because we do not want to pay the price of decision.
Time and time again Jesus stresses the importance of paying a price. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it cannot bear fruit.” “Go and sell all that you have and come, follow me.” “If you put your hand to the plow but look back, you will not find the Kingdom of God.” “Unless you die, you cannot be reborn.” “God, if you will, take this cup from me, but nevertheless, not my will but yours be done.”

Elijah and Joshua encourage us to make a commitment. We cannot serve two different gods, no matter how attractive this option may appear. We cannot serve the god of money, pleasure, comfort, or social status six days a week and then the Lord God on Sunday. Elijah admonishes us to lay aside our secular gods for they are not able to see us through our darkest hours. They are nothing to build a life around. They are the idols that must be smashed if we are to return to the worship of the living God, if we are to return to our true spiritual journey.

Life often confronts us with alternatives, with choices, with challenges. We face such a time in the life of our church. Do we want to grow as a community or not? Are we willing to put both feet into our church? Are we willing to make a commitment as members? Are we willing to be open to change, willing to pay the price that will need to be paid if we are to grow and evolve, if we are to become the church that God calls us to be?

When I think of how integral the matter of commitment is to true Christian discipleship, I think of Jesus’ calling of the first disciples. Peter, Andrew, James and John are fishing. Jesus invites them to leave their nets and follow him. With no assurances of what the future will hold for them, they leave their nets and follow him. I have absolutely no idea how they are able to do this. All I know is that this is a humbling example of commitment.

Elijah, Joshua, and Jesus tell us that the deepening of our relationship with God begins with commitment: the decision to build our lives around the living God rather than the so-called gods of our secular culture. This is the challenge that they set before us. I pray that we will rise up to meet this challenge and that, as individuals and as a church, we will embark upon the exciting journey that comes through a deeper commitment to God, a closer walk with God in the year to come.

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