

June 20, 2010:

I Kings 19:1-15a (p. 302); Galatians 3:23-29 (167); Luke 8:26-39 (p. 59); Psalm 22:19-28

When I was ordained over 26 years ago, I faced a council of local churches made up of clergy and lay people who had the opportunity to ask me any question that came to mind. This time of questioning came after the presentation of one paper detailing my faith journey and another paper concerned with my theology. Sometimes the questions asked for a clarification of something I had said and others just seemed to come out of the ether.

One person asked me to define “atonement” while another asked where I stood on salvation. Then one asked me what my favorite scripture reading was. This question caused me to pause for a bit because there are so many I have found helpful in my life. Various Psalms came to mind, a few words from the prophets, the Sermon on the Mount, etc., etc., etc.... Then, this morning’s reading from the Letter to the Galatians just sort of popped out. This surprised me but probably no one else in the room. I was about to be the first woman ordained by my home church and had been in seminary with about five other seminarians, all male. It had been a long and hard row to hoe in my church, which had a very progressive theological stance and a very conservative political viewpoint. Some believed that the ministry was not for women, so I received no support from the leadership of the church. But, many members of the congregation believed that the ministry was the place for Alice. They sustained me through three grinding years, times when I looked for equality in the church—the kind that was written of in Galatians. The kind that reminds us that as long as we follow the teachings of Jesus and seek to continue his ministry and mission, we all are one, whether we are Jew or Greek, free man or slave, male or female. We all have a basic equality.

In answering this question, perhaps, a still, small voice, a voice of sheer silence, spoke to me through the earthquake, wind and fire of all the other questions posed to me. Maybe, I was a little like Elijah, pausing at the door to the cave and finally hearing the voice of God. I will never know. I just know that there was a basic understanding in that room. I had not cast out any demons, that is not one of my gifts but, perhaps, I had opened a few eyes to the validity of my call. I am sure many thought that I would not have lasted as long as I have in the ministry. But I have, and I have never had a regret about awakening to the call that came to me.

The task of all of us, as Christians, is to recall the words Paul wrote to the Galatians when we feel we are dealing with people who are not quite as good as we are, or quite as holy or quite as worthy. When we look at people with judgmental eyes, we cease looking at them with the eyes of God—with eyes that are inclusive and that value each and every one of us. When we begin to see the value our fellow humans have, we can help them deal with the legions of demons they have in their lives and, even help them cast them out.

This is what we do when we allow someone to pour out their heart to us. We take what they have told us and tenderly help them sort out the grain from the chaff. There is no other way of letting someone know we value him or her than to simply sit in the place where they are and listen to them, allowing them the space to let go of what has been gnawing on his or her soul. Sometimes, when we do this we offer them the sheer silence

in which they may hear the voice of God leading them out of their quandary and back into life. We often need not say anything, just be silent and let them know that someone loves them and accepts them where they are and who they are in life. Someone who does not offer advice just to break silent pauses. It's a wonderful thing to be accepted for just who we are.

Of course, it helps a great deal if we can accept ourselves as children of God and recognize our worth. But, too often, we can't. That is when the words of Paul should ring a bell in the inner recesses of our minds and tell us that we are O.K.—we are decent humans and we are able to grow beyond where we may be into becoming even better followers of Jesus.

For that is what we are meant to become. To become the best humans we can and to grow in love and strength and courage as we face life. We are to remember that through the life of Jesus we have been shown the face of God and the way God desires we follow. The way that helps us become more loving, forgiving, accepting, non-judgmental humans understanding that in the eyes of God there are no divisions among us and that we are all on an equal footing for “there is no Greek, nor Jew, no free man or slave, no male or female” when we are all united in learning the ways of Jesus and putting them into play in our daily lives. It really is easy and it really is life changing when we stop expecting perfection in life and simply move forward appreciating all God has given us. When we choose to stop and take a look we will discover that our blessings are far too many to count.

How do we find the sheer silence of God that helps us find our direction? By pausing often at the cave door of our lives, setting aside our busyness—often busyness that keeps us from looking at ourselves--and simply listening for what it is God is trying to tell us. Then we need to turn and offer the kindness of what we have found to others. Very often they will pick up the ball and carry it with them so that other people are touched by the way in which lives can be lived and changed for the better.

This was the hope that Jesus held in his heart for those who chose to follow him. This is the hope we must hold, a hope that can make the world a better place one person at a time.

-- Amen