

Reflection

Wednesday, June 17, 2020

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“As God lives, and you yourself live, I will not leave you.” These words of Elijah in the reading from the second book of Kings resonate with my spirit. As I ponder this passage, I am recalling the Chapter of Elections in which I was elected to leadership. While that Scripture reference was not on the tip of my tongue, I have found that passage to speak to my experience over these years. While in leadership, I have felt the presence of God several of the times when this was particularly true.

Together with the Marygrove Board of Trustees we needed to make the difficult decision to discontinue programs and eventually close the college. At times, with the appropriate Mission Councilor, we shared challenging news with a member of our community. Most recently, the global pandemic has given us new challenges. Throughout these times, our God has walked with me and I have experienced God’s presence, a gentle presence guiding my steps. That is true for each of us as we journey responding to the call to live as religious. Recently, I was told that today is anniversary day for reception, first vows and final vows for some of our community. As they celebrate more than 60 years in the community, each of them may recall the guiding presence of God in their lives as IHMs.

The reading from the second book of Kings is part of the Elijah cycle. The readings today in that cycle emphasize the divine power of God through Elijah. The image of a whirlwind is a common image of God’s presence – one that clearly makes known God’s presence in Elijah’s life and, after he leaves, Elisha experiences the same. In a similar manner, the reference to a flaming chariot and flaming horses speak to evidence of God’s presence. These visionary encounters reflect Elijah’s love of God and his relationship with God. How I wish, at times, there was strong evidence of God’s presence in my life. Rather, God’s loving presence is with us at those difficult times as well as times of celebration – perhaps as a whirlwind or maybe a whisper. The invitation is to trust in our relationship with a God who walks with us on the journey.

Elisha’s request of Elijah to have a “double portion of your spirit” is an interesting one and one Elijah does not deny. Rather, he establishes a condition of sorts: Elisha needs to see the ascension of Elijah before this comes true. What transpires is the first of three miracles that confirm that Elisha is the rightful successor of Elijah as he takes on the mantle of leadership. How many times do we feel that we are the right person at the right time?

In a similar manner, Jesus does not say give up almsgiving, prayer and fasting, but rather Jesus reminds us to do so in such a way that does not call attention to ourselves. We are to be in touch with our motivation in relationship to our almsgiving, our prayer and our fasting. Our “reward” is not in recognition or in the image we give to others. Rather, it is recognition of God’s blessings in our lives.

In the Roman world, perhaps also true today, it was a common practice to publicly engage in actions that impress people, thereby promoting status and reputation. The wealthy engaged in almsgiving that promoted their interests as opposed to the disciples of Jesus who quietly and genuinely met the needs of others. In each of the three admonitions, Jesus refers to the hypocrites. These individuals play the part of a public role of compassion, but their actions do not come out of genuine concern. Prayer, for some, is a public act, showing up at houses of worship but not taking to heart the genuine relationship with God. Fasting is assumed when

Jesus says, “when you fast.” It is not about publicly demonstrating what we are doing but rather fasting for a particular purpose. Ultimately, we have the promise of God who sees what is hidden and will reward us.

In two days, we will celebrate Juneteenth – the combination of June and 19th. This day is a celebration of the end of slavery in the United States. While Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation two years earlier, it was on June 19, 1865, that the slaves in Texas were notified of their freedom. This commemoration is particularly significant this year as we grapple with the issue of systemic racism following the death of George Floyd. Traditionally, our African American brothers and sisters celebrate Juneteenth at cookouts with red food and drink, remembering the blood that was shed, and continues to be shed. Perhaps our menu will not include this food or drink, but we can wear red on Friday to join with our brothers and sisters, particularly during this time as we recall African American lives that were taken away too soon.

As we reflect on the readings for today and our call to give alms, pray and fast, perhaps the invitation is to do so as we continue to deal with systemic racism. Almsgiving is also sharing our time and talents. Can we give of our time to work against this evil that permeates our lives? Join us for prayer Friday afternoon in solidarity with the march that will happen later that day. Let our prayer be such that we can find a way to end this injustice. May our fasting be from ways in which we may take for granted our white privilege.

As we do so, let us keep focused on the message of Jesus. Giving alms, praying and fasting, doing so within our hearts as we work to deal with issues of today, in a particular way to eradicate the issues of injustice in our society. Two issues confront us today – the global pandemic and the call to end racism. In the former, a virus over which we have no control affects our global community, with some evidence that it affects a portion of our population disproportionately. The latter issue of racism is one that has deep roots in our society. To protect myself from the pandemic I know I need to wear a mask and keep social distances.

None of us like these precautions or the restrictions we feel during this time. At times, when I need to put on a mask is disconcerting to me, I mind having to do this. Perhaps as I put on a mask each time or face the restrictions imposed on us, I can pause and remember our African American brothers and sisters and the ways they have not had choices about their freedom.

The Gospel message of Matthew reminds us that our actions are not for the purpose of being seen or recognized. We are called to action that comes from our hearts. It is there that God sees us and holds us close. The question for me to ponder these days is, “Where is my heart? How can I give a heart-felt response to what is the call today?”