

Sermon: Year B, Proper 14

Texts: I Kings 19:4-8

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

John 6:35, 41-51

A few weeks ago, shortly after my last Sunday serving the people of Saint Ann's in Connecticut, one of my colleagues gave me a book from out of her own library, one that was well worn. For anyone who loves books, such personal offerings are the best of all because what is given is clearly words that work, words that breathe, words that quite literally open the world. This was no dusty tome. She told me that over the years she had made continual reference to this slim little volume: she noted that it was at the same time both provocative and deeply comforting, and a couple of days later, when I sat down to read it, it took me less than a page to understand why.

The book was about Celtic Christianity, specifically the vision of faith that emerged in Wales through the several centuries of the dark Middle Ages. This was not a pleasant time, especially within that region. The Roman Empire had fallen and, if the climate itself weren't raw enough, politics had descended into endless tribal warfare. Yet the people showed an amazing capacity not only to offer praise to God but to locate it in the very experience of earth and air and the elements themselves. We don't have the same rich vocabulary so intimately tied to the pungent and tactile stuff of the world. Our words are several steps removed, more broad and abstract. But when the Celts spoke of creation, this didn't refer to an ancient process or an embattled theory. Creation referred instead to what was immediately and intensely present, the marvel of any given moment if we only have the eyes and heart to take it in and realize what is being given to us. As a later poet described them: they seemed to live within a habit and a discipline of this order: "What is life?" one might ask. To which their response would be: "Life is finding a large room within narrow walls."

Before the second paragraph of the first page was concluded, I was caught by this vision. I knew that I was coming here, Bryn Mawr, named by the Welsh. I remembered standing for the first time in the middle of the nave of the church on a particularly rainy April day and being struck by the tall, narrow walls that lead, finally, to the chancel, the sanctuary, and, at quite a distance, the altar of God. As a priest in the twenty-first century, I'm acutely aware of how our faith is often represented as constricting and dour and driven by rules that serve mostly to squelch enjoyment. And as I thought about what could be my first words to you this morning, this refrain grew louder and more wonderfully persistent. I'd like to begin with this conviction and persuasion: Life is finding a large room within narrow walls.

This is certainly the provocation of the lesson read this morning from the first book of Kings. Elijah is tired and worn, and his circumstances are far from favorable. What he desires is release, the relief that we can all seek from time to time by means of resignation and escape, in essence choosing to be as small as possible in order to be freed from problems, frustrations, and fears. He asks to die, which is a narrowness so tight that not even light can invade. But the word of God that comes in response invites a different path. Twice Elijah is touched; twice he is awakened by an angel. Twice he is provided food, cakes of bread and water. He is given sustenance, and what before had seemed insurmountable falls away. His circumstances have not changed, but he has discovered again room enough to breathe, to act, to move forward with purpose because he has

received grace in an intimately hospitable form. This is life. It's also the primary act of faith, lifting others, offering provisions.

The Gospel sharpens this all the more. It is, of course, the report of God's incarnation, God's own humbling of himself by taking on the very narrow form of our humanity. It's a narrowness suffered in all its extremity. Jesus becomes subject to all the ways we make our lives smaller: by suspicion and derision, by jealousy and accusation, by humiliation and false judgment, which reaches its culmination, as Elijah had pleaded, in Jesus' own dying. In crucifixion, God was made most small. But this was undertaken in order to reveal a roominess and fullness that cannot be defeated. Jesus' resurrection establishes within us a space of infinite expanse, no matter how poorly we see this or how aggressively we rebel against this generosity. God's word takes precedence. And it isn't merely announced or declared as a simple principle. It's enacted, first in flesh, and then, repeatedly, in something as seemingly common and mundane as the sacrament of communion. Bread is distributed: bread that's about as narrow and as flattened as possible. But yet, here, in this, God himself is present: not abstractly as an idea or a sign, but profoundly within creation, as a gift that is more than doubly given, food and flesh and room together, without end. This is our faith, which is our belief in God's eternal securing of all creation – even every given moment.

It's this trust that opens in us the capacity to be people of grace, which is exactly contrary to the caricature of religion being primarily restrictive. What's offered is divine privilege. Inspiration is expansion. Faith means increase. Paul was particularly adept at setting this immense possibility within the framework of our lesser inclinations. Listen again to just one sentence, with the mindset of the Celts: "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice" (all the vices that make us small)... and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you." There is no room as spacious as God's word, which is vitally important for us to remember and model when, in our time, so much of what is publicly shouted and privately whispered is fractious and divisive.

According to the lectionary, today is the tenth Sunday in ordinary time, which is about as far as one can get from any of the major feast days. It's also the second weekend in August, when, for many, the only truly attractive word is vacation. It's the quietest time of the year. But this quiet affords me the opportunity to declare the hope of my faith and the commitment of all my ministry. It also allows me to state boldly what I hope will be our mutual joy – that together and in witness to all around us we give form to these words: Life is finding a large room within narrow walls.

The Rev. Peter Vanderveen