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Weekend of Sunday, June 26, 2022
3rd Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 13/Year C
First Reading: 1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21
Second Reading: Galatians 2:1-21
Gospel Reading: Luke 9:51-62
Sermon Title: “No Longer I, But Christ”

Theme

Texts

First Reading: 1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21

¹⁵Then the LORD said to [Elijah,] “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. ¹⁶Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place.

¹⁹So he set out from there, and found Elisha son of Shaphat, who was plowing. There were twelve yoke of oxen ahead of him, and he was with the twelfth. Elijah passed by him and threw his mantle over him. ²⁰He left the oxen, ran after Elijah, and said, “Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you.” Then Elijah said to him, “Go back again; for what have I done to you?” ²¹He returned from following him, took the yoke of oxen, and slaughtered them; using the equipment from the oxen, he boiled their flesh, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out and followed Elijah, and became his servant.

Second Reading: Galatians 2:1-21

¹Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. ²I went up in response to a revelation. Then I laid before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain. ³But even Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. ⁴But because of false believers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us — ⁵we did not submit to them even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might always remain with you. ⁶And from those who were supposed to be acknowledged leaders (what they actually were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality) — those leaders contributed nothing to me. ⁷On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised ⁸(for he who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised also worked through me in sending me to the Gentiles), ⁹and when James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. ¹⁰They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do.

¹¹But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; ¹²for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept

himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. ¹³And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

¹⁵We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; ¹⁶yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. ¹⁷But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! ¹⁸But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. ¹⁹For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; ²⁰and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. ²¹I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

Gospel: Luke 9:51-62

⁵¹When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵²And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" ⁵⁵But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶Then they went on to another village.

⁵⁷As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." ⁵⁸And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." ⁵⁹To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." ⁶⁰But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God." ⁶¹Another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home." ⁶²Jesus said to him, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

Sermon

The readings for today tell the stories of several intense heroes of the Bible. In the First Reading, we hear of two heroes, Elijah, and his understudy, Elisha. Indulge me for a moment. The way most people pronounce these two prophet's names is one of my pet peeves. Arguably the greatest prophet of the Old Testament was **Elijah**. His understudy was **Elisha**. Many lay folks don't notice the difference or get confused by the names and so they just merge both names into one name.

Elijah was one hero of the Bible who never died, he just ascended into heaven on a whirlwind aboard a chariot of fire pulled by horses of fire! How is that for an exit? And Elisha was the plowman in the story who the LORD had ordained to be Elijah's successor.

Elijah was walking toward Elisha and said, "Come on." Elisha agreed to the invitation but wanted to kiss his mother and father goodbye. I get the impression that Elijah did not appreciate that response but told him to go do what he had to do. Then Elisha slaughtered the oxen and used the yoke as fuel for the fire and cooked the oxen and fed them to his townspeople. Elisha was all in, and since he butchered his means of making a living, he made it difficult for himself to turn back. Elijah and Elisha were intense.

I love the expression that Luke used about Jesus's intensity in the Gospel Reading, verse 51:

⁵¹When the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, *he set his face to go to Jerusalem.*

Have you ever watched a road striping crew do its work? There is a driver who drives the rig slowly down the road. Usually, a person or two on the truck keeps the paint flowing. But the real business is being done by one person who rides this little perch in the back whose job it is to keep a sharp eye on the previous stripes, or in the case of new pavement, as in this picture, keep an eye on the guide marks in the road. If that person in the back takes his or her eye off the target the result is a squiggly line (as it is on Boardman Canfield Road west of the Green).

Jesus was fully aware of what awaited him in Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets, and yet he was intense, focused, determined, and as Luke wrote, "set his face to go to Jerusalem" where he would accomplish his ultimate mission.

And in the Second Reading, the focus of the rest of the sermon, we have another installment in my six-part sermon series on Paul's letter to the Galatians.

You may recall last week that though Paul started very politely and professionally, he quickly moved on to what was on his mind that necessitated his letter. In chapter one he wrote,

^{1:6}I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel — ⁷not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.

Paul the evangelist was intense too. Even before he was Paul, when he was Saul, he was intense in his persecution of Christians. But after his conversion and inspired by the Holy Spirit, he worked tirelessly for the LORD – to the point that if the Christians in the communities he felt a responsibility for were not submitting to his authority as an apostle, he got angry! Did he have reason to be? Let's find out.

I know for me, the pastor, I trust that my sermons are inspired by God, personal, often revealing, and sometimes emotional pieces of myself that I give to you as a gift every week. But sometimes I feel like you, the receivers of this gift, are not as enthusiastic to receive it as I am to give it. I could get angry about this, but I am like the sower of seed in the parable. What happens to it after I cast it is not my concern. Conversely, Paul felt a deep responsibility to the communities he helped birth and those he continued to visit and teach and write letters to, like the Galatians.

In chapter two, our Second Reading for today, we begin to learn the issue that necessitated this letter. Did you notice that Paul mentioned "circumcision" eight times in twenty-one verses? Did you know circumcision is mentioned nearly one hundred times in the Bible? In case you are not familiar with circumcision, I have a video I would like to show you. Just kidding.

By the way, I overheard two guys in their 30's, discussing the subject of Circumcision. One guy was dead set on getting it done, since his parents didn't have that done for him. I couldn't help but to get in on that conversation. I said, "I don't recommend it!" When he asked why, I told him, "I had it done when I was a new born and I couldn't walk for over a year!"

Circumcision was a symbol of the covenant God made with Abraham known as the Abrahamic Covenant. Circumcision was a symbol of every Hebrew male's acceptance of the covenant. Beats me why circumcision and not a pinky swear, but there you have it.

So the issue that Paul was fighting against was that there were some among the Galatian fellowship, likely some Jewish proselytes, who were trying to convince the Galatian Christians that they needed to be circumcised, because circumcision was the symbol of their Jewishness, and they further taught that one had to become Jewish first to become Christian.

This was not a new thought. Again, we are in the apostolic period. The Christian movement was new. There were no scriptures except the Hebrew ones, the ones we call the Old Testament, and we can imagine how that would affect a new convert to Christianity. They're all on fire for the LORD and want to learn and do the right things, and the only thing they have is the Old Testament, and so they do their level best to be good Jews because that is all they could know.

And then in verse 11ff., Paul mentioned that he debated this very issue with Peter, PETER!, who, after he had that vision of the unclean animals coming down and the voice of the Holy Spirit saying "Kill and eat," did indeed have a change of heart regarding Gentiles, who Judaism taught were unclean. Peter began fellowshiping with them, even eating with them. But Peter got hung up on the issue of circumcision. He thought circumcision was still required. But Paul argued that Peter had only gone halfway in his ecclesiastical theology. What he actually said was,

^{14b}"If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

What to do? The other apostles were willing to let Paul be the apostle to the Gentiles, (the uncircumcised), and Peter and the other apostles would be the apostles to the Jews, (the circumcised). But Paul, not the rest of the apostles who had been with Jesus for years, argued that what they were doing was dividing the Body of Christ into two separate fellowships, and that was contrary to the Gospel as he understood it. No, Paul argued that we cannot divide Christ's body, the church. He will amp up his intensity next week in chapter 3.

So here in the apostolic period of the new Christian Movement, there was this seminal moment that Paul forced to a head in debate with the other apostles. Will they divide the Body of Christ into two separate fellowships, one for the circumcised Jews, and one for the uncircumcised Gentiles, or will all Christians form one Body in which all are one and equal in stature?

We can be thankful that Paul and his theology prevailed. In another letter to the Ephesians, he wrote,

Ephesians 4:4^TThere is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

Paul humbly came to this conclusion through his relationship with Christ through the Holy Spirit which caused him to reject all the bad Jewish theology he had been taught and was being proliferated by Peter in Jerusalem and others in Galatia and emptied himself of all personal ambition. Yes, Paul was intense, but not because he selfishly needed things to go his way. No, Paul understood that Christ died for all, and therefore the Body of Christ cannot be divided. So he argued for Christ, the Lord of all. That is how he could conclude, what I used as my sermon title; "No Longer I, But Christ."

I'll give you an example of this. Last Saturday evening after church, Carol and I went out to Mastropietro Winery and had a glass of wine. We could tell that this one group of people was growing in size over several minutes, and they were a mish-mash of people: young and old, straight and gay and trans (I presumed), tatted and conservative, odd clothed and conservatively clothed. Carol and I were both fascinated.

We eventually ended up in a conversation with a woman from the group and as it turned out, she was the matriarch of the group and her husband was a pastor from the Church of God. The church and the pastor's family had camped at a church camp nearby for years and though they didn't live in the area anymore, it was the place their daughter wanted to get married. So all the other young people knew each other from that camp or people who had gone through that camp. All were Christian, from all over the country, gathered to celebrate the wedding of their friend. That group is an example of the diversity and yet unity of the Body of Christ!

I give thanks to God for the intensity of the heroes of the Old Testament, especially Elijah and Elisha, but they didn't die for my sins, and Jesus did, so I am going to make him my example of godly living. His face was set toward Jerusalem, where he would be

- betrayed,
- denied,
- abandoned,
- tortured half to death,
- convicted in a mockery of justice,
- and crucified till dead

for the sins of the world, the whole world, Jew and Gentile, men and women, slave and free, people who more or less look and act like me, and people who couldn't be more different from me.

And I thank God for the apostle Paul, whose intensity forced the young Christian movement to recognize that Christ died to *fulfill* the law by his sacrifice on the cross. Therefore we are justified through faith in him, and not by the works of the law (i.e., circumcision).

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

But Pastor, what does this have to do with us? I am so glad you asked. I mentioned last weekend that one of the great heresies alive and well in our society today is Glory Theology, which teaches that the better Christian we are, the closer we get to God. I see this playing out in the second chapter of Galatians.

I think we can understand this, and maybe we have even dabbled in this ourselves unknowingly. "If I just do my devotions every day, or read a chapter in my Bible every day, or attend church every weekend, then God will be pleased with me and I will earn my golden ticket to heaven." That's what the rich young man in Matthew 19 thought. But this is some stinking thinking. We cannot achieve righteousness on our own!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this sermon is more than a history lesson, because the lesson of this sermon seems to need to be retaught in every generation. The work of making us and all human beings righteous has been done by Christ on the cross. So let us stop trying to work out our righteousness to appease God, and to live abundantly, free to please, honor, and glorify God by the way we live our lives, in thanksgiving for the righteousness that is ours through Christ.

Prayer

God and Father of all, forgive us for making the main thing *anything but* what we should be making the main thing, and that is the work that your Son Jesus did on the cross. Unite all Christians around him, the Lord and Savior of all. Amen