

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
Proper 4 Year C
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Reflective of our roots, and evidenced by our reading from the first book of Kings from the Hebrew Bible this morning, Christianity has often been cornered into a proclamation as revealing the only and true God, embracing the reality that our God is better and more powerful than all other gods, and dismissive of all other ways to encounter the divine. Our Hebrew scriptures can be read to instill within us an image of God as a jealous God and we can understand our job as Christians to line up on the right side of that dividing line between true or false faith and belief.

Elijah, the prophet whose story is told in the Book of Kings, sees that dividing line and, in his heart and soul, knows he is the only one on the right side of the line. He is prophesizing during the reign of King Ahab, who is an opponent to the God of Israel, YHWH. Ahab's wife, Jezebel, brought, a pantheon of gods with her into the marriage, of which Baal was the god above all gods. In our story today, Elijah calls for a contest between Israel's one and true God and the multiple gods now being worshiped in the Northern Kingdom of Judah. The odds are already stacked against him, as Elijah is a single prophet set against the praying force of hundreds of prophets worshipping Baal. Yet he goes the extra mile to continue to stack all odds against his God, for he believes in the power of the truth of YHWH. Baal is known as the god of rain, thunder and lighting, so if any god can ignite this fire of the sacrifice, Baal can. But of course, he can't he is not real. His power is imaginary and the faith of the people who worship Baal is empty and hallow. In a dramatic move, which turns hearts and souls to Israel's God, YHWH, truth is revealed; God is made known and salvation occurs. We learn very clearly from our reading this morning, that there is one true God and all other gods are powerless against this truth.

In our Epistle reading, from Paul's letter to the Galatians, Paul is presented with a similar situation: discerning the truth for others, this time not among different gods, but different interpretations of the gospel. Prophets, learned people, and believers have come into this newly formed community of Jesus' followers, and have said that Paul is all-wrong. Their belief is that one must come through Judaism to enter Christianity. As we know from our study of the Book of Acts during Eastertide, Peter refuted that formerly held truth and was supported by the Council of Jerusalem, in declaring that however you get to the truth of Jesus doesn't matter, whatever practices in your life you need to obey in order for you to live out of that truth are fine yet optional, and that it is your heart turned toward compassion and love of Jesus that matters. The story of Pentecost is reflected here: whatever language you speak is fine; as long as, whenever you hear the language of others, however foreign to you on the surface, you hear the language of love. So we see the progression of the hard dividing line evidenced in the story of Elijah soften a bit in the story of Paul.

So, what does Jesus do with this dividing line that is pulled through our readings? In our particular story today, He erases it. In Jesus' mercy and compassion for the other, in this case the slave of a Roman soldier, someone who represents power, oppression, violence and war, someone who is allegiant to a system based on fear and corruption, which ultimately will hang Jesus on the cross, Jesus heals and proclaims to the world there is no one outside God's realm of justice and mercy.

So where are we, where are you, in regards to the solidness of the dividing line between the faith we believe to be true and real and the way to our salvation, and those for whom God has been revealed in differing sets of beliefs or practices?

It is a good question to ponder in this pluralistic society we find ourselves living within.

This is one of the questions we explored in our Missiology Course this past semester, which was based on the book of Acts. Our assignment was to answer the question: "Is it possible for Christians to honor their belief in the divinity of Christ and his unique role in God's plan for the reconciliation of the world while also affirming other faith positions?"

Rather than giving you my answer, I'm going to encourage you to think about this question by reflecting on the following models presented in the course, in light of our readings today.

The first model is one of universalism or pluralism, a model of which core belief is that there are many equally valid paths to God. Christianity is one of those paths but is not superior to any other path. This model contains the belief that a part of the truth of the divine is revealed to each of us and only together may we see the whole picture. Often the analogy used is blindfolded people who each touch a part of the elephant and only through conversation and the sharing of their experiences can a complete image emerge. An argument in favor of this model is that we are all created in God's image and therefore whatever God has created, God will save. An argument against this is that much of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures speaks of a division, between the goats and the sheep, the wheat and the chaff, the believers and the non-believers, so the question is raised, is this model consistent with beliefs found in our scripture. Certainly Elijah would not have supported this model as he called the question regarding the one and true God. Elijah did not believe the pantheon of gods was a valid pathway to the divine.

The second model goes to the complete opposite understanding, that of exclusivism. One's salvation is entirely dependent upon Jesus being your personal Lord and Savior. If you don't believe this or cannot claim a personal relationship with Christ, then you will not be saved. The argument for this model is the understanding that if God is just, then the unjust, the unholy, and the sinful (the ones who do not know Christ) must be punished and excluded from the grace of God. The argument against this model is the understanding of the exuberant and abundant love of God, which passes all understanding. My sense is that Paul might have lined up behind this model. He didn't

seem to care how you got to Jesus, but it was your relationship with Jesus that gave you abundant life and life eternal.

The third model is one of inclusivism, understanding that what Jesus did for humankind was for all humankind. What you believe, what you do doesn't matter. Your salvation was won for you on the cross and in the empty tomb. Whether your heart is turned toward God or goodness or not, if you strive to do the right thing in all situations, or not, if you treat people with kindness and mercy, or not, and you love Christ, or not, God welcomes you into the fullness of God, here on earth and in heaven. This model also holds the possibility that after death, you may meet Christ then and will have the choice to follow. The argument against this model is that we aren't given a choice. Salvation has been determined for us. In our gospel today, when Jesus healed the complete "other", without hesitation, he opened the kingdom of God to all people, whether or not they are deserving, part of a system of oppression and violence or not, believers or not. Jesus is saying there is an abundant feast to which all are invited.

I offer you the challenge to claim our faith and belief in Jesus, while understanding that others may not hold these same beliefs, for a number of reasons:

- 1) It matters to your Christian identity. Claiming whom you are in Christ and living that out in your relationships with others who may believe differently is something you should struggle with in order to reach a place of clarity about who Christ is to you.
- 2) It is always a good reminder to notice that multiple understandings of our religion, from who's in and who's out to the criteria for salvation, can be supported by some scripture verse. It's good to live within the tension and knowledge that the bible is not consistent in message and that we need to do the discerning work of finding the large truth set within the gift of our scripture.
- 3) Lastly, how we answer the question, "Is it possible for Christians to honor their belief in the divinity of Christ and his unique role in God's plan for the reconciliation of the world while also affirming other faith positions?" shapes how we live out our faith in our community of Shippensburg.

For example, let's take our community meal program. When we began the program, we didn't even ask the question as to whether or not we would attach worship to our meal offering, feeding people's souls as well as their bodies, as some of other churches do.

Some people may see it as good thing not to attach worship to the meal, taking the universalism approach – if ever or however our guests encounter or articulate the divine doesn't matter to us and we certainly shouldn't impose our particular set of beliefs on anybody. Through our actions we are bringing the love of Christ to them and that's enough.

If we took the second approach, that of exclusivism, we may say, "Being in a personal relationship with Jesus is what fuels my life, brightens my day, offers me hope, and I want

everyone to have that renewed life, so let's not be stingy with grace. Let's share Jesus through the Eucharist with everyone, so all can experience Christ in the sacrament and turn their hearts toward the true and only God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

Or, we could imagine the inclusivism approach, that we are all in the Kingdom of God by God's saving act of the resurrection, whether we like it or not, so what you believe doesn't really matter. We're all one together in the one and only true God. What we do or what we share doesn't really matter, as long as we live out of a sense of being connected in Christ.

It's complicated, isn't it, figuring out how to claim Christ as our Lord and Savior while living with and listening to people for whom that is not their experience. As we understand the church more as going out into a world foreign to Christendom, a world with no comprehension of the world we live in through Christ, a world which can be just two blocks away on Fort Street or around the corner in the Laundromat, we may need to learn a new language, and it will be okay, as long as we hear and speak in the language of love.

Amen.