

TENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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"The Spirit's Ordinary"

Twelve hardworking ordinary guys stuffed in a boat trying hard to make it from point A to point B, and one apparition floating above the water – oh..no....it's the Miracle Messiah Man Jesus. Its amazing they didn't drop their oars into the drink. Or like last Sunday, 5000 ordinary, work-a-day men, plus ordinary women and undoubtedly ordinary children, and one spectacular, larger than life, miracle-working Messiah Man. And that's kind of how we see the saints of God, the spectacular, Holy Spirit blasted ones, compared to us ordinary pew people. Really, though, that is such a limiting perspective to what God wants to do through us; and he has said so.

Lord, let your word only be spoken, and your word only be heard. Amen.

Although in reverse order than planned, I am taking last Sunday and today to talk about themes that are common to several of the Sunday's lections before and after. One is about saints of God, and one is about miracles themselves. Today, Saints. You know the two go hand in hand; in the final level of investigation of the Western Catholic tradition, those who may be affirmed as a saint must have evidence of miracles during their lifetime, usually healings. The Eastern churches use the term glorification, and run the gauntlet of a synod of Bishops before placed into their calendar. I think it is important to say, though, that the Church, whichever branch, does not "MAKE" saints for its emulation and devotion; the Church recognizes and affirms those who were already "Saints" by God's gifting, before any Church elder is asked to consider them so.

With such seemingly skeptical layers of investigation, and surrounded as we are by ominously huge and dramatic artwork, such as icons and stained glass windows, where, as the little girl in Sunday School said to the question who are the saints, she said, they are the ones the light shines through, it is no surprise we do not consider saints as ordinary people, and we only allow ourselves to be the ordinary ones.

The children's hymn that we love so dearly speaks to several elements of our consideration.

Patient and brave and true, who lived and died for the Lord they loved and knew;

The emulation we desire is in the hymn, And I want to be one too,

But even this hymn, leaving us with a positive and encouraging affirmation of the theology that God himself is in us and with us as ordinary folks, doesn't want to take that next step into believing "the miraculous" being part of our own ministries.

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Of course, all it takes is that awareness in our own minds that God COULD work through me as miracle worker, worker of healings, one whose intercessions seem answered faster and more frequently, and then the last verse of that hymn explodes with possibilities.

I know I teased you with thinking about Jesus and the miracle of walking on the water, but I'm going to lead you to the Old Testament lesson for today to consider these points I've brought to your attention..

Without a doubt in all of the story of human beings in God's service, there is not a more picturesque or dramatic figure than Elijah the Tishbite.

In his dress, in his manner, in his looks, in his appearance, in his life, in his ministry, he was as rugged as the mountains of Gilead from where he came. He made so much of a deep impression upon Israel that from that point on it became the habit of a prophet to dress like Elijah; with coarse hair or with skins and secured around his middle with some kind of a rough belt or cincture, long uncut hair and an ascetic, forbidding demeanor. I believe that's one reason why when John the Baptist appeared, his very presence and the sound of his voice was remarkable, even startling to those who saw and heard! But reminiscent.

Remember how Jesus made a direct connection between John the Baptist and his clothes, how people went out to take a gander at what a prophet looked like? Kind of like going to the zoo? And Jesus made the connection between the attire of Elijah and the attire of John. But then pointed not to the outward appearances, but the internal calling by the Spirit on both.

Elijah's protégé, Elisha, as he looked upon the older prophet, and as he had been introduced to the life and work of the man of God, showed a deeply penetrating sensitivity, an understanding of the power of the prophet. This is because Elisha could see and he understood that the tremendous abilities of Elijah, the man of God, did not reside in how he was dressed, or his quite majestic demeanor, or his asceticism, or his sudden appearances, or his thundering pronouncements, the thunderous voice that shook Israel. But Elisha could see that the power of the man of God was found in the Spirit of the Lord that rested upon him.

As a result, when Elijah said to the younger prophet, "Ask what I shall I do for you, before I am taken from you" the discerning younger man said, "I beg you, let me inherit a DOUBLE share of your spirit."

Now, emulation of the saints is one thing. But here in this moment we see demonstrated and vividly, if only potentially portrayed a weakness that we find in the ministry today, and always have had. It's one of those things that the Search Team will be keeping in mind when they observe the candidates for Rector.

Wherever you see an unusually gifted preacher, he will be almost always accompanied by some idiosyncrasy, some peculiarity. And always there will be some turn of personality about him that is very forceful and unusual. And it will be the weakness and the habit of the preachers of whatever generation, to imitate, to mimic, and to copy the idiosyncrasy, the peculiar

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eccentricity of the preacher,. Perhaps Joshua after Moses, perhaps Elisha after Elijah. Perhaps the next generation of Episcopal ordinands after the preacher Bishop Michael Curry!

I thought it might be fun to look at some other denomination, though, and see the same weakness. Just to show that all churches are equal in this. And I found a really remarkable sociological set of observations that I've never seen in one place before. It comes from that revered Southern Baptist preacher and teacher W.A. Criswell, who spent most of his pastoral career at First Baptist in Dallas. 50 years worth. In a sermon in 1967 he listed several well known preachers of various generations and their emulators.

He said, well, there's Len Broughton, from the early 1900's, a tremendously successful preacher of the Lord, wore long hair,(not like George Dreyer's formerly long hair) long hair that flowed to the back of his head and a long, long coat. And in the generation of Len Broughton, all over the length and the breadth of the land, you would find preachers standing up, especially younger ones, with long uncut hair and long Prince Albert-like coats. And I suppose the commonest scenes that I find among ministers today in those little peculiarities will be found in their long hair.

John A. Broadus, from the mid-1800's, was a tremendously, scholarly, dedicated student of the Word of God, and because of his much studying, he developed a stoop in his shoulders. And in his generation, from one end of this Baptist Zion to another, all the young men who stood up to preach stooped over the pulpit just as John A. Broadus.

Thomas Talmage, the most eloquent, doubtless, of all of the preachers who ever lived in America, had a peculiar way of chopping up his sentences, of breaking his sentences. And all over the length and breadth of the land, the young minister preached breaking up his sentences.

And a little later on there came Billy Sunday, and he preached, breaking up chairs. And all over the land there were preachers who broke chairs over the pulpits.

And in our own day the pathos in the voice of the great pastor of this First Baptist church, Dr. George W. Truett, could be heard in a thousand pulpits as the younger men sought to imitate the tremendously effective tones and voice and delivery of the great George W. Truett.

Amazing observations. Makes one think of one's aspirations.

But in this story Elisha could see that simply to mimic the man in his dress or in his voice or in his appearance or in his delivery was truly only selfishness, an attempt to bring attention to one's self, and spiritual stupidity. First and foremost, one needed the power of God that rested upon Elijah. So in his request he makes that – as we now see - humble petition, , "I beg you, let me inherit a double share of your SPIRIT."

You see this, don't you?.... It is not the massive impressions we have of sainthood that we should apply to ourselves, after their full lives have been investigated, and books written, and

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artistic renderings created. It is God in the man or woman now that makes him or her powerful for the kingdom of heaven.

Why is this not the petition and supplication that we carry in our hearts? Why do we tend to limit God's abilities in us by spouting the false humility of only being so unworthy? Perhaps we need to redefine ordinary believers from OUR definition, to what God wants as ordinary – that is, ordinary in all being Spirit-filled, and expecting lives of emanating God's power and love. That kind of ordinary! Then let's turn the prayer of our hearts to that same request of Elisha to Elijah, the power and the spirit of Elijah – which was so clearly the Spirit of God - upon us. Now we are back to the children's hymn, because the hymn follows closely both the Word of God, the holy Scriptures, and the history of the Church; and it should be so strongly impressed upon our own hearts this truth: that these men and women of God, almost without exception, were plain, ordinary men and women who were filled with the presence of the Spirit of God upon them – plain, ordinary men and women. They were herdsman, they were shepherds, and shepherdesses, they were husbands, they were tax collectors, they were fishermen, they were caretakers, they were mothers and wives, they were carpenters, they were tentmakers, they were seamstresses, and diemakers. They were plain, ordinary men and women. But they were touched by the power of God.

You remember from last week's Old Testament reading the confrontation of Amaziah and Jeroboam at Bethel with an unknown herdsman from the south of Judea? That was Amos, and he was challenged by Amaziah to keep his mouth shut and go away as he was no Prophet. And do you remember what Amos replied? "It is true", said Amos, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, a simple dresser of sycamore trees, and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'

Plain, ordinary men and women filled with the power and Spirit of God; these are the ones who we place into stained glass, and suddenly we think more of them as predestined holy ones, and perhaps we can find a way just to look like or sound like them to get some of what they had. Besides those ordinary folks in the bible, Come up through the centuries and think of the many poor socio economically challenged business owners, just trying to eke out a living, and all the – as the group *America* sang – "all the lonely people, Thinking that life has passed them by" – and yet the thousands and thousands who can be named, as in the children's hymn. It's the Spirit of God upon the man or woman that makes the difference. And in the shadow of the Elijah's, we can be the Elisha's asking for a double spirit resting upon us.

Where shall we do that? Where will the Spirit of God be alive? Where is the place where Elijah and Elisha met the chariot of heaven? Here. The Spirit of God upon us in our worship and edification here, in sanctuary and chancel and nave. We can say, no matter how wondrous or as just an ordinary Sunday the moment might be described, that these services are lifted out of the realm of the earthly and the mundane, and as heaven and earth are joined together, into the realm, as the world sees it, the realm of the extraordinary and the supernatural because of the presence of God among us.

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It is only what we already believe. “Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there I am in the midst of them” . So, here you are, Lord.

And, “This is my Body” and “this is My Blood,” and, here you are, Lord, here for us to be with in Real Communion.

Let me quote again from that Baptist, Criswell, “Who could be an ordinary minister in such a divine and holy presence? Who could do other than bow before the great High God and ask that His blessing and His Spirit rest upon us?”

God grant it to us, as ordinary folks, as a priest, as a people, as a church, and as God’s fellow witnesses in the earth. Let us, O Lord, be the saints of God. Now.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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