

Elements of Choice
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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1 Kings 18:20-39; Mark 12:32-34

Let's begin with a joke... A Jew, a Muslim, a Christian, a Buddhist, a Hindu and an Atheist walk into a bar. They share a drink and great conversation. And they become friends... *Because they live in a multifaith society and they're not jerks.*

In Elijah's day, things were different. Influenced by their religion, people fought wars over their faith. And it may be a little difficult for us to understand why Prophet Elijah comes off as such a sarcastic jerk and what the big deal was all about.

Before we get into all that, let's connect the dots and set up some background information.

You may remember last week that we focused on a major life-shaking event in the lives of our ancestors: a break-up between the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah that occurred during Solomon's son King Rehoboam's reign. Remember that the split was directly caused by the monarchy's refusal to treat the people with justice and compassion. Following bad advice had consequences.

Fast forward about 120 years and we find ourselves in the dysfunctional Northern Kingdom during the troubling times of King Ahab's reign. Ahab's father had sealed a treaty with the King of Phoenicia by accepting his daughter, Jezebel, as a wife for Ahab. Queen Jezebel brought with her the worship of Ba'al, the Canaanite god of rain and fertility symbolized by a bull.

During their reign, Jezebel persecuted Yahweh's worshippers. She was determined to replace Yahweh (the Israelite's name for God) with Ba'al. Weak-willed Ahab chose to not intervene in her campaign, instead he supported her by building her god Ba'al an expensive and lavish temple (1 Kings 16:29-34).

Many Israelites detested Ba'al worship, not just because it was a challenge to their God, but also because it was a threat to their community. Like many other ancient religions, the worship of Ba'al included certain rituals that were abhorrent to them. Among those was child sacrifice.

But Ba'al worship also attracted some Israelites. They found it easier to worship an idol they could see than a God whom they could not. The rituals appealed to their most primitive instincts. Maybe that is because it is always easier to mold God, or religion, to our idea of what should be rather than change ourselves to match a standard.

Elijah, the persistently prickly prophet, objected to Ba'al worship as a violation of Israel's covenant with God (Ex 20:3).

Most of God's people then (as they do now) were wrestling with big questions. Who really controlled the rain, cycles of nature, life, and death? If Ba'al, they would have to practice the ritual in order to survive. If Yahweh, they would have to live by the high ethical standards of the Law of Moses (as written in the Torah). Which should they choose?

As people who were brought out of slavery in Egypt, who were given an identity and a way of life, who were brought out of their wilderness wandering and given a land in which to settle, and who had the distinction of being God's specially chosen people, their turn toward another god is nothing short of blasphemous. It is a direct violation of the first commandment, and a rejection of the One who had done so much for them.

In his call to bear witness to God within a divided Kingdom and among a people whose spiritual loyalties were wavering, Elijah could choose to bear witness in a variety of ways. As a prophet of God among God's chosen yet increasingly faithless people, he is understandably upset. His role was to call the people back to faith. But he was just one person. So he chose to challenge the priests of Ba'al to a duel of sorts, filled with over-the-top mockery and dramatic antics. And Elijah emerged victorious.

While we may not perceive ourselves in a battle for allegiance and loyalty, the truth is that there are forces competing for our devotion and commitment. Within our own Christian religious tradition, there are a variety of expressions competing for recognition and authority. How do we decide what's authentic?

In today's reading, the Israelites navigate troubled waters in their primary relationship with Yahweh, their God, the one who brought them out of the land of Egypt. They know their God as one that is concerned with justice, one that has compassion for the orphan, the widow and the refugee, and cares about the poor.

And yet, the Israelites have also seen their neighbors taking advantage of one another. Any crops that were harvested were because of the backbreaking efforts of the peasants. Only a few at the top reaped the benefits. As resources became scarce due to famine and drought, they began to doubt that there would be enough to go around. They began to neglect their responsibilities to the orphans, the widows, the refugees and the poor and they abandoned their commitment to the well-being of the whole community.

In doing so, they ignored the values and obligations expected of them by their God. So, not only are some two-timing Yahweh by worshipping Ba'al and other Canaanite gods, they are also neglecting the teachings and law that were intended to promote a just, fair, stable, caring community. They have become oppressors worshipping whatever god they think will increase the harvest so that they make more money. Selfishness, greed, and economic injustice are at the root of the Israelites problems.

It's an important lesson for us today. When thinking about the authenticity of religious expression, I would like to humbly suggest that one important consideration is economic. Money is a key indicator of values, beliefs, commitments, and world view. So if you follow the money, you get a good idea about what a particular religious expression is really all about.

I think this applies across religions. Whether Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, or Christian, following the money will point us to key indicators of what is really important and valued by that particular religious expression.

Within Christianity, there are a variety of approaches. We've all seen the prosperity gospel preachers who live on multi-million dollar estates, drive Bentley's and wear four thousand dollar suits. It seems like that lifestyle is living a LONG way from Jesus. But if your expression of Christianity promotes monetary gain and opulent wealth as a sign of divine blessing, you can see how that might happen. And yet, there is no basis for that perspective in the actual teachings of Jesus. Which proves that it is very easy for us to distort our religious expression to suit our own ends.

Following the money tells us a lot about who we are. If you go to a church where it is clear that there are people coming from a variety of economic situations, I think that says a lot about a community's love and acceptance of one another. Another indicator is to ask what kinds of mission and outreach the church is involved with. Or how they use their buildings: do they see their physical plant as a precious museum to be protected or as a center of community to be used to serve people's needs?

Jesus preached more about money, wealth, and greed than he did about heaven and hell combined. That is because the nature of our purse reflects the nature of our soul. And while it is true that not all Christians today accept vows of poverty, we can look at the teachings and life of Jesus and see where his priorities were and how he advocated for those in need.

There are a variety of religious expressions; some authentic, valid, and sincere. Others distorted and self-serving. And some a mix in between. Elijah asks the Israelites, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions?" That question challenges us as well. It invites our single-hearted devotion to the way of Jesus and our constant vigilance in the sincerity of our religious expression.

What are the indicators of our generosity? How are we meeting the needs of those who surround us? What are we doing to change the systems that perpetuate injustice and poverty? Does what we do with our money show that we too are on fire for the God of justice, compassion, and mercy shown to us by Jesus Christ?

Religion is part of our reality. Sometimes it can seem misguided and hare-brained. But it can also be a transforming power for good in the world and in our lives. Religion is powerful. But it is our choice how we use that force.

Sometimes we hear people say "Just believe in God"... but I'm not sure there's much depth in that... at least, not at first. Faith must always build on something. For Noah, it was a rainbow set in the sky. For Abraham and Sarah, it was their son's birthing cry. For Moses, it was a burning bush. For the Hebrews, a parted Red Sea. For Naomi, it was a daughter-in-law's promise. For John the Baptist it was the blind receiving their sight. For Mary Magdalene it was an empty tomb.

Religion is full of potential. We are here because we believe in the immense power of our Christian faith for good. So, let us not be afraid. Let us expect God's faithfulness. And let us choose to take risks. And, like Elijah, let us expect the fire... not of hell, but of the power of God to ignite our world with love. May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen.