

Make the Choice
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
November 3, 2019

1 Kings 18:20-39; Mark 12:32-34

You may have noticed a couple of times recently in worship, immediately after the sermon, we observed a moment of silence. The purpose of that was to give ourselves the opportunity to reflect on the message we just received and its significance...before we move onto the next thing, be it the next hymn, coffee hour, an after-church errand. Today we're going to do just that. At the end of this reflection we'll pause in silence, to de-clutter our minds, think about the meaning of what we just heard, and figure out what, if anything, we might want to do differently as a result.

I've been blessed lately to begin volunteering as a driving coordinator with a group in Newtown called the Interfaith Partnership for Refugee Resettlement, or IPRR for short. One of the things that attracted me was the way my friend, a practicing Buddhist, bubbled over with joy and gratitude when she spoke about it. For her, it has been a really rewarding experience to see a refugee family start a new life here, after years of living in a tent in a refugee camp.

Kate Barnhart and I attended our first meeting at IPRR a couple of weeks ago. What impressed me the most was the religious diversity of the people gathered around the table. In addition to the other mainline Christians, there were Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Roman Catholics, Latter Day Saints and even a couple of atheists. Each person had something great to add to the conversation. It struck me how beautiful it is to see people of different faith traditions working together towards a common goal.

This kind of interfaith cooperation is pretty special. It hasn't always been easy to gather people of different traditions together to work toward a common goal. In Elijah's day, things were quite different. People killed each other over religion.

You may remember last week that we focused on a major life-shaking event in the lives of our faith 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. The split was caused because the

King followed some bad advice and refused to treat his people with justice and compassion. That bad behavior had consequences, when Jeroboam led ten of the twelve tribes to secede to the North. Over time, these disconnected tribes veered towards all kinds of idolatrous behavior, including but not limited to the worship of foreign Gods.

Fast forward about 50 years and we find their sins have only gotten worse under the reign of King Ahab. He and his wife, Queen Jezebel of Phoenicia, promoted worship of Ba'al, the Canaanite god of rain and fertility.

Many of the people detested Ba'al worship, not only because it was a challenge to the God of Abraham, but also because it was a direct threat to the children of their community. You see, like many other ancient religions, the worship of Ba'al required their children to be sacrificed.

I've had some rough times as the parent over the years, but I've never considered taking it quite that far!

And yet, Ba'al attracted some Israelites. Maybe they found it easier to worship an idol they could see, rather than a God whom they could not. Or maybe, as they encountered a long period of drought, they were afraid of the future, so they clung to what made sense to them in the moment.

Elijah, the persistently prickly prophet, objected to this. As a prophet, his job is to be a "troubler" or agitator, and it's true because he does come off like kind of a jerk! Nonetheless, when the majority of people around him conform to the times, seeing what they were doing as "not that bad" Elijah saw it as a dire threat.

Most of God's people then (as they do now) wrestled with big questions. Who really controlled the rain? If Ba'al, the Canaanite storm and rain God was in charge, and that's who they should turn to for help. If the God of Israel was the one in charge, that meant they should start living by the high ethical standards of the Law of Moses, which was really difficult to do outside of Jerusalem's gates.

Which should they choose?

In his call to bear witness to God among a people whose spiritual loyalties were wavering, the Prophet Elijah tried to call the people back to faith. But he was just one person. So he challenged the priests of Ba'al to a duel of

sorts, filled with over-the-top mockery and dramatic antics. And the prophet emerged victorious. This over the top response won some of the people back. No all, but some.

While we may not perceive ourselves in a similar battle for allegiance and loyalty, the truth is that there are forces competing for our devotion and commitment every day. How do we decide what we should choose?

The Israelites knew they were called to follow a deity who has compassion for the orphan, the widow and the refugee, who cares about the poor. And yet, they also saw their neighbors taking advantage of one another. As they saw their resources become scarce due to famine and drought, they began to doubt that there would be enough to go around. And that is the moment when they began neglecting their responsibilities to the vulnerable and abandoned their commitment to the well-being of the whole community.

Because a competing God told them to.

In doing so, they ignored the values and obligations expected of them by their faith. Not only were some two-timing the God of Israel by worshipping Ba'al and other Canaanite gods, but they were neglecting the teachings and law that were intended to promote a just, fair, stable, caring community.

In this story, God comes through in a mighty spectacular way—fire falls from heaven at the simple, humble request of the prophet. This is how we want God to respond to God's people. This how we want God to respond for us. How nice it would be for some days to be able to request and receive that kind of power! But that typically doesn't happen to us.

Our God is no less powerful but often acts in subtlety and understatement: instead of fire from heaven, a few loaves and fish feed 5,000 people; instead of fire from heaven, the right person shows up at your door in your moment of need with just the words you need to hear or the food you were hungry for. Today, the fires of heaven are more like a candle in the darkness or a feeling of peace that settles in our heart.

When the church lives the faith, people see the difference that a life of trust, hope and love makes in a life, in a family, in a community. And when they see, God has a chance to change a heart. The masses may not see and fall to their knees in prayer as in Elijah's day. But, one or three or a family may

see and experience what we have found in following in the footsteps of Christ, and they may turn their hearts to God and be changed forever.

At MCC we believe in the immense power of using our faith for good. So, let us expect God's faithfulness. Like Elijah, we can expect the power of God to ignite our world with love. May it be so, and may it be soon. Amen. (silence)