

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

June 10, 2007

Second Sunday After Pentecost - Proper V

In the Name of our One Living God, ever creating, ever loving and ever sustaining, whom we know as the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This week's lectionary readings not only echo one another but also several things I have seen in the news this week. Last Sunday, at about this time, an 8 year old boy named Will Smith was killed when his mom's car was struck by a vehicle driven by a young 23 year old woman that went out of control and crossed over into their lane at Ukumehame. Last Sunday, again at about the same time, my friend Jim Kelsey, the Bishop of Upper Michigan, returning from a parish visitation was killed when his car was struck by another out of control vehicle. Although in his late 50s, Jim also left a grieving mother who lives near our home in Western Massachusetts. Life and death are the ultimate polarities of the human condition. One follows the other and represents the limit of human autonomy, power and control and poses for all of us not only a reminder of the fragility of life but also of our own personal ultimate limitations. People we love pass from our presence and we are powerless to prevent it. Both our Gospel reading and our reading from First Kings command our attention because they reverse the normal order of life and death.

Our OT reading is about the prophet Elijah going at God's command during a severe famine to a widow in Zarephath in Sidon who has been commanded to feed him. She does feed him, giving Elijah the very last of her provisions – what was to be the last meal for her and her son. Elijah gives her God's promise that the jars of meal and oil will not run out until the famine is over. Later the widow's son falls ill and dies. Elijah takes the boy's

body into the roof chamber and lies on the body three times imploring God to let the child's life come into him again. When God answers Elijah's plea and he is able to return the living son to the widow, she declares him a man of God and a truthful prophet.

Elijah is a strange prophet who arrives out of the blue wearing animal skins and a belt to speak God's words of judgment on the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the reign of King Ahab and his Phoenician wife, Queen Jezebel. When Elijah arrives to declare a 3 year drought, things had been going pretty well for the northern Kingdom. The economy was booming, there were no powerful enemies on the horizon, trade was good and Ahab had made a good alliance with the Phoenicians by marrying their Princess Jezebel. The trouble was Ahab allowed Jezebel to promote her religion that worshipped Baal. The people were forgetting Yahweh since they believed that Baal could more easily be cajoled into giving them all the goodies. I think this is part of human nature; we tend to forget our reliance on God and our own vulnerabilities when the goodies are rolling in.

I think this story is interesting for a number of reasons. It tells us something about God that God seems to want us to know about God's power. The first is that God is a God of compassion who favors protecting the powerless, the orphans and the widows. The second is that the God of creation who gives life to human kind has power over death as well. The third is that God is a universal God – the God of all. By sending Elijah during the famine to the widow in Sidon, God showed his power over the Canaanites as well as the Israelites – so much for Baal, therefore.

Luke in his Gospel repeats the story almost verbatim in describing Jesus. This is no accident and not the result of a lack of creativity. It is Bible talk – retelling an old familiar story about God to explain a new experience. It creates an “echo effect”, a reverberation between the two stories, so that much of the power of the new story comes from its

resonance with the old. When the similarities are so great, a careful listener or reader will pick up especially on the differences. Did you notice that Elijah was in a closed room alone with the dead boy whereas Jesus acted in public surrounded by a crowd – two crowds actually, the mourners and his own followers? Did you notice that in Luke it is the woman’s only son, thus amplifying the tragedy, and that Luke stresses Jesus’ compassion – noting “his heart went out to her”? While Elijah had to stretch himself out over the child and implore God three times, Jesus accomplished his resuscitation of the dead by a single authoritative command : “Young man I say to you rise!” The widow declares Elijah a man of God and that the word of God in Elijah’s mouth is truth. The crowds proclaim, “A great prophet has risen among us!” and “God has looked favorably on his people!” In other words, the crowds recognized the power of God in Jesus’ actions.

Our Gospel points to the fact that the one who had compassion to bring back the widow’s only son has himself triumphed over death. As humans we are limited and mortal. We cannot undo what happened to young Will Smith or Jim Kelsey. We can take comfort in the fact that the Lord of Life has shown that death does not have the last word. That knowledge of God’s power over death, combined with faith that our God is a compassionate God, is, as Paul explains, both transformative and empowering. Paul in his letter to the Galatians is celebrating the fact that his encounter with the Risen Christ has freed him from his past, from the limitations that created Saul and has allowed him to grow into Paul – Apostle to the Gentiles. This is pretty radical stuff. An encounter with the power of the Living God in the Risen Christ led an ardent Pharisee, someone who would consider himself religiously impure if he stepped into a Gentile home, to not only share a meal with them but to devote his life to their inclusion in the Church.

This is what our faith in God is supposed to do – it is suppose to enliven us, transform us and embolden us. We are suppose to look at the world through what a friend

of mine calls her “God glasses” (seeing God in all of this) and recognize that the Living God is the God of all that has life – that is all people, our oceans and all that is within them and our aina and all that lives on it.

Will Smith, young as he was, knew this; most kids do, especially if we adults remind them. He had a passion for nature and a passion for Africa and its peoples. We can only wonder how he would have lived out this passion. Jim Kelsey knew this. He was an innovative thinker who helped to transform two dioceses. He thought outside the box and saw that there was a different way of being church. He wasn’t what we would call a Big Box Church guy (as in Big Box Malls). He was a Different Box Church guy – one who saw the mission of the Church was to transform the lives of the people in it and to connect them to their communities in such a way that all those little towns in the Upper Peninsula would be touched and transformed by the healing hand of the Risen Christ.

At Jim’s funeral mass, there was no great parade of priests and bishops, no great procession of the Anglican Ship of State. Some would see this as disorder and confusion. Others would see it as Church at its best – a gathering of all sorts of people whose lives have been touched and who had become friends and who mix it up together. When I think of the recent irregular consecration of a foreign bishop on our soil and I think of +Jim’s simple funeral, I have to ask - Are we to be a Church of Saul or a Church of Paul? Are we called to build churches that keep people out or churches that equip us to go forward into our communities and bring the peace of God in Jesus Christ to all.

Amen.