

“In the Strength of Christ”  
1 Kings 19:4-8 and John 35: 41-51  
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This is one of those weeks when I’ve worried all week long  
about what to say in the sermon  
because I want so much for us not to hear Jesus’ words in a distorted way.  
For a few weeks now we have been reading  
the Bread of Life scriptures in John.  
I preached on the first of them before going to Maryland,  
and Jan McGilliard did a beautiful job  
interpreting last week’s text  
as a fundamental statement about trust in God,  
which is indeed the crux of the whole chapter.  
Because these texts are similar and because they’re hard,  
part of me wanted to leave it at that  
and concentrate on another scripture for today,  
perhaps the moving story of Elijah  
protected and provided for by God in the desert.  
But there is a pressing reason  
to stick with the difficult-to-understand statements  
from Jesus about himself as the bread of life,  
and how he fills and feeds us and all others who belong to him.  
The reason is that this scripture is often used to reinforce  
a stream of Christian thought  
that misses the core of faith completely.  
It’s the idea that being a follower of Jesus is,  
ultimately, a decision we make.  
You can see how easy it might be to hear Jesus words  
“whoever comes to me” or “whoever believes”  
as a human action, a choice being made by us  
to accept the gift of faith that God gives.  
But that is not what we Protestant Christians profess at all.

The reason it matters is because thinking we are responsible  
for choosing to be Christians has led some Christians today  
to deep derision toward people of other faiths.  
This derision can take the form of constantly trying to convert them,  
instead of getting to know them, learn from them, care about them,  
and celebrate the things God is already doing in their lives.  
One on-line commentator put it beautifully.  
He said, why are Christians such “stinking” friends?  
We’re not a friend to someone you don’t accept and are always trying to  
change.

Thinking Christianity is a “choice” that we make can also lead to judging non-Christians as headed for rejection by God.

In the most fundamentalist churches  
it leads to pronouncements of hellfire.

Worst of all it leads to the open confrontation  
shown a year ago this weekend in Charlottesville,  
when white supremacists marched through the streets shouting  
“Jews will not replace us,” along with  
a host of racial slurs.

An anniversary march by white supremacists  
is taking place in Washington DC later today  
and counter protesters have also gathered there.

As I was writing there had been no clashes yet.

I have not learned of any this morning. But Rob and I were there in Charlottesville  
a year ago today, and we saw the ugliness by people  
who claimed to be Christians first hand.

Perhaps that’s why of all the ways I might have gone with our text in John,  
I felt compelled to make sure we would hear Jesus’ words  
as a declaration of God’s provision,  
not hear Jesus saying it’s “Christianity or nothing.”

Right now in our country too many people  
are using race and religion  
as reasons to deride, ridicule and reject other people.

Actions like these draw responses  
like one attributed to Mahatma Gandhi:

“I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians.  
Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

So let me say bluntly what you already know:

There is not a single thing about judging or belittling  
non-Christians that belongs in a Christian life.

Neither should we ever weigh-in on what kind of afterlife  
people of other faiths or no faith are going to have.

According to Christian teaching and tradition,  
faith in Jesus Christ is a gift from God.

That very statement appears several times in our scripture today.

Hearing his Jewish neighbors complain  
that Jesus thinks he’s something special,  
Jesus counters their complaint by saying

no one can come to him unless  
they are “drawn” to do so by the father.

He expounds on God’s action further  
by adding that people who come to him do so

because they have been taught to by God.  
Only then does he say that he himself is bread unlike any other,  
even the bread God gave their ancestors to eat in the wilderness,  
that bread filled them for a day.

Belonging to him, he tells his critics,  
will fill us for a lifetime.

If you have been a Christian for any length of time  
you have heard many times that faith is a gift from God.

I hope you also know that *acceptance* of faith  
is also God's doing, too, not a choice we can take credit for.

Yet many Christians have been told they do have role to play  
in accepting the gift of faith, or somehow "allowing" God to give it to them.

The name for this way of thinking is Pelagianism.

It's a heresy named after the 4<sup>th</sup> century monk who argued for it  
in a now famous debate with Bishop Augustine of Hippo.

Pelagius' ideas crop up in two forms, a strict form,  
and a more moderate form that is probably  
even more widespread in churches today.

The strict form goes like this:

God has given us laws and commands telling us how to live.

And God has given us freedom to obey or disobey those laws.

If we choose to obey, God includes us.

If we refuse to obey, we are rejected  
and given the punishment we deserve.

In other words we can save or damn ourselves  
by the choices we make and the good works we do.

A good summary is "God helps those who help themselves."

Yet again and again in scripture

God helps those who cannot help themselves.

Elijah could not help himself.

He had done what God had asked him to do.

He had confronted the priests of Baal,  
the priests belonging to Queen Jezebel and he had defeated them  
in a contest pitting the power of Baal,  
against the power of Yahweh.

It's an even more dramatic story in the Bible  
as opposed to the children's version.

You might want to go home and read it later.

As you heard, Yahweh wins

and the priests of Baal all perish at the peoples' hands on Elijah's command.<sup>ii</sup>

Jezebel is therefore out to get Elijah's life.

And so he has fled into the desert. That's where we came in.

There he collapses under a tree, burned out, afraid, uncertain,

and too depressed to do anything for himself but die.  
That is the situation in which God provides for him,  
when he is utterly helpless with no will to live.

We Protestants and the Roman Catholic Church reject  
the strict “God helps those who help themselves” view.  
For one thing, it does not account for human frailty and sin,  
which leaves us unable to earn God’s love.  
Also, the strict Pelagian view does not admit  
that in reality we follow the commands we like,  
and we ignore the commands we can’t or don’t want to obey.  
The help yourself view also overlooks how even when we do try  
to follow God’s commands, we usually do it  
out of self-love that wants to be congratulated or rewarded,  
as Elijah would like to be, for being morally and spiritually “correct.”  
Worst of all there is no room in strict Pelagianism  
for the depth or fullness of God’s love,  
which saves us we are at our very lowest or our worst.

The moderate form of Pelagius’ ideas is less stark  
and preserves a far more Biblical understanding of sin and grace.  
That makes it more appealing, but it is also not what we profess.

It goes like this:

We are all sinners who leave undone what we ought to have done  
and done things we ought not to have done.  
Even the good we do is tainted by less than admirable motives.  
So we are indeed totally dependent on the grace of God.

But, said Pelagius, there is one thing we can do.

We can recognize our need for God and *ask* for the faith  
we can’t achieve ourselves.

And the best way to show our willingness  
to receive what Christ offers is to become part of the church.

If we turn to God in this way,  
then God will choose us, love us, and include us.

If there are some who are not included,  
It is because they have rejected God.  
Salvation is by grace alone, but only for those  
who sincerely want it and ask for it.

There are plenty of scriptures, and plenty of Christians, that support this view,  
Acts 2 says “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”<sup>iii</sup>

In Revelation Jesus says “I stand at the door and knock.

If you hear my voice and open the door I will come in to you.”

Others scripture do say that although Christ died for all,  
faith comes alive for those who decide to believe in him.

We all know Christians whose faith fits exactly what I've just described and it likely fits some of us in this room.

But the Protestant Reformation and we Reformed Christians today reject this semi-Pelagian view for at least three reasons:

First, it overestimates our ability to love, trust and depend on God.

Even the mighty Elijah, remember, was finished and ready to die when angels came to comfort and feed him.

My Nephew Alex, raised in the church from childhood

to love and trust God, fell victim for fifteen years

to the worst form of alcoholism and addiction

and says he would surely have died homeless on the street

if God had not reached out and saved him,

for he did not have the strength to save himself.

The ability to love, trust and depend on God

is not something we do without God's working in us.

A second reason for rejecting the idea that we are the agents in faith is that it makes salvation dependent on what WE do, instead of on what God does.

God can't really be a loving powerful God until we ASK for God's love.

Christ can't be our savior and Lord unless we LET him be.

The Holy Spirit can't change and renew us unless we WANT her to.

It leads to speeches that go like this:

*You just have to try harder. You can believe if you really want to.*

*If you feel alone and apart all you really have to do*

*is make up your mind to turn to God, accept Christ as your Lord and Savior,*

*open your heart to God's Spirit. If you do that God will love you, help you, save you.*

*But you have to make the first move.*

I apologize to everyone in the room who grew up that way and left the church because of it.

Beloved this is self-salvation.

It is very powerful in evangelical churches, and it is not what the church proclaims.

Finally we reject the idea that we have choice when it comes to faith because it denies both the love and sovereign power of God.

What kind of God says "I will love you, come to you, be on your side IF you first love me"?

What kind of Lord says "I can overcome the power of evil in the world IF you give me your vote of confidence"?

Beloved, God's love and power are not dependent on our acceptance to be real.

Self-salvation is not Christian faith.

We believe that the ability to say "yes" to God

is a gift of God's grace, given to undeserving people as an act of love.

With God's help we respond with joyful participation

in the community of God's people, the church,  
and we live with thanksgiving toward each other  
and our neighbors near and far.

In Christ we are set free from private, self-seeking obsession  
with present and future happiness and security,  
and we expect to find grace in the community of those  
who experience love, forgiveness, help,  
and salvation in our life together.

We help and we serve and we offer love ourselves to the church and all our neighbors  
as a reflection of what we've come to know,  
and we make no damning judgements  
about the future of people of other faiths or no faith.

But we do share our joy by the welcome we offer, by the care we demonstrate,  
by the true friendships we build, and by the hope we have for all people.

We are also charged by God to welcome, befriend  
and get to know the stranger, and marvel at every form of  
of goodness and truth we find in the world and in other faiths,  
for all goodness and truth comes from God.

I hope you also heard in the reading from John  
that neither God, nor Jesus as the agent of God,  
is willing to let human resistance go unchallenged.

Jesus declares that God is drawing people to him.

God chooses some for never for themselves, always for the sake of all.

The Greek word for "draw" in our reading will appear again in John  
in Chapter 12 when Jesus declares that when he's lifted on the cross  
he will *draw* all people to himself.

God's plan "for the fullness of time" is "to gather up all things in [Christ]"  
And God will accomplish it.

I'm not entirely sure why I felt so compelled this week  
to preach such a dense "what we believe" sermon today.

I know the anniversary of the violence in Charlottesville and  
the visions of so called Christians shouting hate  
had something to do with it. That and my fears  
about the raw divisions in our country,  
so many of which derive from people announcing  
that they and they alone have the answers.  
That had something to do with it.

I simply could not bear the thought that anyone today  
would hear Jesus words as an "us versus them" declaration.

There is no tidy ending to this sermon in my head,  
so I will do what I charge myself and all of us to do, always, turn to the Word.

In our story in First Kings, Elijah, fed and comforted,  
is told to continue in the strength of the food God has given him.

He is not promised that the things he fears will never harm him.  
He is not instructed on what might happen next.

He is comforted and fed, and told  
that on the strength of that food he can go on.  
Maybe that is why this sermon arrived in my heart today.  
We, too, beloved, live and move and have our being in the strength of Christ.  
The Bread of Life, author of true freedom for all people.  
The Savior of the world.

So, I turn to Paul's words.

Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with God and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that. AMEN.

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<sup>i</sup> There is some doubt, however, as to whether this came from Gandhi. A similar quote appears to be from an Indian philosopher named Bara Dada, brother of [Rabindranath Tagore](#). The full quote from Dada appears to be from the mid-1920s: "Jesus is ideal and wonderful, but you Christians, you are not like him."

<sup>ii</sup> Don't, please get distracted by the grisly details. It's a story designed to demonstrate that Yahweh alone has the power to save.

<sup>iii</sup> Acts 2:21