

Our text for Graduate Sunday is far from “Pomp and Circumstance.” The story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel sounds like something straight off the elementary school playground, “My God is better than your God.” “No, my God is better than your God.” But when we turn to our very adult newspaper, and read about what we are doing to one another in the name of God, this ancient story sounds like headline news.

Religious extremism comes in many forms; Christians, Muslims, and Jews have all resorted to violence to defend our faith, and we can all look to the verse that follows our text as justification for that violence, *1 Kings 18:40 (NRSV) Elijah said to them, “Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape.” Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there.*

So we begin with an awareness of the danger; we begin with the humble acknowledgement that in an often intolerant world, we Christians are all too often part of the problem, so it matters how we respond: *1 Kings 18:21 (NRSV) “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.” The people did not answer him a word.*

Option 1: Silence is Golden?

The people play an interesting role in this story. They gather at the king’s command, but they’re in no hurry to commit; they won’t commit to following the Lord. They won’t commit to following Baal. They’re keeping their options open.

The choice between Baal and the Lord is the central spiritual question of the Old Testament; the choice between following the Lord and following someone/something else is the central spiritual question of the Bible. With Joshua, we are continually asked, *“Choose this day, whom you will serve.”*

In the name of tolerance, we may politely decline the offer. We may keep silent. “Live and let live.” “You say tomato and I say tomato.” “Can’t we all just get along?” But as we know, not to decide is to decide; not to choose is to choose; and ironically, being noncommittal does not guarantee that we will be tolerant (or tolerable for that matter). We can be fiercely independent such that anyone who does have a strong commitment can be perceived as a threat. “Don’t tread on me”

we say as we step on the commitments of others. Thus, we pass ordinances that ban Muslim’s from practicing sharia law and demand that Muslim women show their faces and not wear burkas. Or we forbid circumcision and men wearing prayer shawls. History is full of creative ways by which we the tolerant have been very intolerant in the name of tolerance.

Silence is a center that will not hold; our commitments define who we are and guide what we do (admittedly for good and for ill). So a lack of commitment will not resolve the problem posed by the religious violence in 1 Kings or in our world. To resolve the problem of religious violence, we need to make a commitment; a commitment to renounce religious violence in deed and word; a commitment to “follow him”.

Option 2: Follow Him

Just because something is in the Bible doesn’t make it right; just because a significant Biblical figure like Elijah said, “Do this,” doesn’t make it right.

I think Elijah was wrong to tell the people to seize the prophets of Baal and kill them. I think he fell into the trap that people of faith like us fall into when we feel like our faith is being threatened; we think that we have to defend the faith; we think that as a follower of God we have to fight for God. In fairness to him, the 450:1 odds with the king and queen against him may have factored in as well. If so, then Elijah acted out of fear not faith; the result predictably was not good.

We don’t have to defend God. God can take care of Godself. God is able to have fire fall from the sky which not only consumes a bull, but also a trench filled with water, the dirt that was wet from the water, and the stone altar on which the bull had been prepared. Since God can do that, God will be OK if we separate church and state such that a Nativity Scene isn’t in front of City Hall and the 10 Commandments aren’t posted at the County Courthouse.

God will be OK, but when we “lose our religion” in the name of defending the faith; when we resort to behaviors that clearly violate, “Thou shalt not kill,” “honor your father and mother (Calvin and the Westminster Catechism teach that this applies to honoring elected officials),” and certainly, “love thy neighbor,” we aren’t following him.

We're getting ahead of God, and anytime the cart is before the horse, anytime the followers are out in front, we will go astray. The Centurion knew his place; know yours. Post the 10 Commandments on your wall; and keep them. Put up a Nativity Scene on your lawn; and celebrate Christmas in way that honors Jesus Christ and resists the seduction of our consumer society.

The great Christian novelist Frederick Buechner wrote this in his book, “Telling Secrets:” “Stop trying to protect, to rescue, to judge, to manage the lives around you . . . remember that the lives of others are not your business. They are their business. They are God's business . . . even your own life is not your business. It also is God's business. Leave it to God. It is an astonishing thought. It can become a life-transforming thought . . . unclench the fists of your spirit and take it easy . . . What deadens us most to God's presence within us, I think, is the inner dialogue that we are continuously engaged in with ourselves, the endless chatter of human thought. I suspect that there is nothing more crucial to true spiritual comfort . . . than being able from time to time to stop that chatter . . . ”

Simply put, know your place; stop trying to lead God and follow him.

We witnessed the power of this commitment during this past difficult week. Sally Walters and Karen Young were models of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. We admire so much about them, and well we should, and the center that held them together was their commitment to be a follower of Jesus Christ. That's what inspired Sally's incredible legacy of community involvement. That's what enabled Karen to persevere and continue to hope. And our shared commitment to be Pennside Presbyterian Church expressed in our prayers and cards and words of encouragement offered more than we will ever know to their family, their friends, and to their pastor. Thank you.

Commitment empowers us to renounce violence; it is the foundation upon which we can resist the fear that we have to defend the faith. We're following God. God will take care of Godself, but when we lash out in the kind of offensive behavior with which we are all too familiar, we're reacting out of our weakness rather than God's strength. It takes strength to turn the other cheek. It takes strength to live like a Christian in a world that prefers to keep its options open. It takes strength,

for as Gandhi taught: “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.”

Frederic Buechner put it this way in this Pulitzer Prize winning novel “Godric,” which offers his unique telling of the tale of one of England’s patron saints; in this scene, Godric encounters a priest who teaches him:

THIS LIFE OF OURS is like a street that passes many doors," Ball said, "nor think you all the doors I mean are wood. Every day's a door and every night. When a man throws wide his arms to you in friendship, it's a door he opens same as when a woman opens hers in wantonness. The street forks out, and there's two doors to choose between. The meadow that tempts you rest your bones and dream a while. The rack-ribbed child that begs for scraps the dogs have left. The sea that calls a man to travel far. They all are doors, some God's and some the Fiend's. So choose with care which ones you take, my son, and one day—who can say—you'll reach the holy door itself."

"Which one is that, Father?"

"Heaven's door, Godric," he said.

Silence isn’t golden. Tolerance is most in danger when it is the desired outcome of indecision. It takes strength to be tolerant; strength born of commitment, commitment to a God who does not need to be defended; a God Who is great and good. Elijah believed in great but missed the mark on good. We can do better, so choose to do better.

Have faith like the Roman Centurion. Know your place. Make up your mind; “follow him.” Amen.