

Bread and Kindness for the Journey

There's a story about Elijah in the Old Testament. Elijah was a prophet who served during a time of deep religious rivalries and a drought that lasted three years. Three years of climate disruption, economic devastation, and loss of lives due to lack of food. It was a prolonged period of challenge but there were also moments when Elijah experienced God's power to heal and to provide.

At one point, Elijah experienced a huge victory in his struggle with corrupt political and religious leaders. It was such a big victory that the queen put a bounty on his head. It was at this moment that Elijah seemed to snap, and he walked with despair into the wilderness inviting God to go ahead and take his life. He falls asleep, perhaps from exhaustion and despair, but an angel wakes him and says, "Get up and eat" and he looks and sees a loaf of bread and a jar of water. He eats and drinks and falls back to sleep. Again, an angel comes, this time saying, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." And on the strength that came from that bread and water, Elijah travels forty days to the place where God met Moses, and there, Elijah encounters God's presence, not in a violent wind, not in the earthquake that followed, not in the fire that came after the earthquake, but in the sound of sheer silence that followed all that dramatic disruption.

Elijah's journey narrative includes elements of sustained challenge, a showstopper victory, an emotional collapse, nourishment at the hand of God, and continued walking. His path leads him to an encounter with the power and presence of the Almighty God, who meets him in his moment of deep isolation and promises to bring him a companion in his work.

We too are on a journey, and in a time of sustained conflict, disease, and systemic injustice. Some of us may be trying to hold onto the moments where we have seen God's faithfulness, lest we forget. Others of us may feel like Elijah, believing this moment to be pregnant with meaning, but feeling exhausted from the drama of sustained engagement. I think the journey narratives that we find in scripture help us to remember that life is far more like a sustained journey than like the experience of arrival. And that in the midst of all that, God calls us to rest and eat and rest and eat, and to seek out the places where God will meet us. We need food - we also need kindness.

In his letter to the church in Ephesus, the writer seems to suggest that if a church is going to continue in the journey of faith, her people need to rely on each other and build the kind of relationships that are mutually sustaining. The church will need to resist cultural habits around conflict and competition; it will need to have something more than the easy comfort of a club of like-minded people. And it will have to learn habits of profound kindness, forgiveness, and love for each other.

The author knows that this does not come easily – people inevitably have bad days and rub each other the wrong way and differ on points of theology and politics and choice of hymns. There will be too few volunteers to help with coffee hour or children’s formation or sound and video. People will get burned out, people will pull away for a time, people will feel impatient. People will stand on soap boxes, people will say insensitive things, and priests, because they too are people, will do the same.

And so the writer of this letter tells the church: love each other, be kind to one another. Find healthy ways to deal with your anger and disappointment. Let the church be different than the dominant culture in this way. Direct your words toward the things that build each other up.

From time to time my sister and I, when we were much younger, would playfully pick at each other. My dad would say, “Girls, girls, is that edifying?” He was referencing this passage from Ephesians and the call to build each other up, to edify each other. It always made me roll my eyes, but he was right to interrupt a kind of teasing that started out playfully but usually ended up with someone feeling hurt – and usually not me, because I was the oldest and knew how to win.

In the midst of COVID and social media wars and political name calling and actual physical violence in our capitol, in our streets, and in many homes across this country, a quirky little tv show called *Ted Lasso* popped up. And it has become a kind of phenomenon. Journalists have written about how the optimism of its lead character seems to offer a balm for viewers who have felt on edge for so long. They usually highlight Ted’s optimism, but when I sat down to watch it, I was struck by his relentless acts of kindness. In the face of locker room bullies he offers fathering, in the face of a boss who wants to push him away he keeps delighting her with homemade cookies and insightful gentleness, recognizing the ways in which she is hurting. He stands up to expressions of toxic masculinity even when everyone clearly dismisses him as a fool. He’s a low-level American

football coach hired to lead a British soccer team, and he appears completely out of his depth.

He walks through life unarmored, vulnerable and exposed, open to disappointment, but also wise in unexpected ways, faithful to his friends and team, and fiercely committed to something larger than winning. He wants to help those around him grow. He apologizes when he is wrong, and he forgives those who have tried to undermine him. And he chooses to believe when everyone around him warns him that hope always disappoints.

I look at the response people are having to this fictional character. People have written into the show saying, “My family now talks to each other more kindly.” And this is what the church can and should be – a collection of holy fools who heal wounds, transform anger and frustration into compassion and forgiveness, and who model belief when it might seem ridiculous given the circumstances around us. In the show, Ted does all this while himself going through tremendous heartache. He has allowed his own hurt to help him see the pain others carry.

When I look at the Greek words the writer of Ephesians uses, he is saying, “Let nothing that is rotten or foul come out of your mouths as words...Put away from you all bitterness and inner tempests and snatching and clamor and verbal abuse, together with all evil mindedness, and be good natured, full of compassion, extending grace to one another, as God in Christ has loved us.” It’s a challenging journey that we are on, and we need to be kind and tenderhearted with each other.

And as Elijah discovered, we need food. Not just any food, but the bread God provides. Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Which is not to say that whoever comes to me will never feel tired or overwhelmed or frustrated with others. But whoever comes to me, will be fed; their thirst will be addressed in ways that bring some healing to broken spirits.

The word for forgiveness is derived from the Greek word *charis*, or grace. That same word is embedded in our English word Eucharist. In the Eucharistic meal, we are fed with the bread of grace and strengthened for the work of loving each other back to the table each week where we can be fed together. Loving each other in ways that offer refuge in the midst of trauma, encouragement in the face of despair, and an antidote to rage.

I really do believe that our capacity to acknowledge our anger, to let it reveal areas of loss or disappointment that we can then grieve, and then to see even the grief eventually transformed into some kind of compassion for self and others – this capacity is a gift of the Eucharistic meal. Through the bread and the wine, Jesus says, “I too have felt anger and grief, and I have allowed that to grow into an eternal source of compassion and grace for you and for all. I will not abandon you – as a witness, here is my body and blood. When you are slighted, or wronged, or undermined; when you feel foolish and awkward and out of your depth, I am with you. I will feed you and you will continue to learn compassion in the face of your own inner tempests. You will find ways to love each other.”

Come to the Eucharistic table, whether virtually or in person, and take what Christ offers, so that the journey will not be too much for you.