

7th Sunday of Pentecost

Sermon 8.9.15

Scripture: I Kings 19:4-8
Ephesians 4:25-5:2

One summer day, when I was about twelve years old, I was riding my bike home from the beach, a three-mile ride. Two miles into it, midway up Atlantic Avenue, was Mr. and Mrs. Miller's house. Mr. Miller and my dad were close friends. They owned a small boat together, and my sister and I had a standing invitation to come use their aboveground pool whenever we liked, which we did only occasionally. Ironically, when it was so hot that we'd want to go swimming it was too hot to want to make the ten-minute bike ride.

That day, as I passed the Miller's, I saw an ambulance in the driveway. I stopped to see what was going on. What I came to learn was that Mrs. Miller had had a heart attack and had died. She wasn't old—maybe sixty. She wasn't even known to be ill or have heart problems. It was all very sudden, unexpected.

Terrible as the news was, I remember it now because it was the first time I'd been privy to something so monumental before anyone else in my family. I was the one to carry it to them. I was the bearer, the messenger. That's what they wanted: Mr. Miller wanted me to tell my family. Or was it one of their young adult children who so dispatched me? Probably. I don't remember the details.

What I do remember is that, by the time I reached my house, I was giddy, which only complicated how I felt about it all. Why was I giggling at Mrs. Miller's death? Was I actually gleeful that something so unfortunate had happened—and to someone so important to so many people important to me?

Was I somehow delighting in this?

I knew gossip was wrong. Once, a few years earlier, when my grandmother was visiting and so borrowing our car, a yellow Volkswagen Bug, to bring my sister and me on our annual trip to McDonald's, she backed into the mailbox and dented it under the bumper, unseen unless you looked for it. Later when I told my mom, "Granma dented the car," Mom said, "No one likes a gossip." I hadn't meant to gossip. It was just something that had happened in the middle of a long, slow day in my New

Hampshire childhood. Something had happened! It seemed so rare that anything ever did.

But this time I'd been asked. I'd been entrusted. This time, I was authorized to gossip.

"Gossip" came into the world as a gift, a blessing. Its earliest appearance in a written document is from 1361, in England. In that, and in other uses for centuries to come, it denoted the women who were companions at childbirth. Different from the midwife, the "god-sib" was as a sibling, a sister to the woman giving birth. She was there to support the mother-to-be, then to announce to the village the arrival when the birth was complete, and perhaps even to become a godmother to the child born.

Of course, it's come to have far less positive associations, and beginning not long into its life as a concept. It came to be synonymous with what's rendered in several Old Testament texts as "backbiters" and "whisperers," and to be in league with what's rendered in the New Testament as deceivers and maligners. In his letter to the Romans, Paul includes gossips (or their Greek equivalent) in one of his lists meant to underscore how low human beings can go. "They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil..."

In sum, it's a word and concept that will be tough to bring back from the dark side. But I admit I'd like to try to.

Paul doesn't mention gossip in his letter to the Ephesians—that is, if we take this letter as having been written by Paul. As I said last week, there's some debate over this. Thematically similar to what the undisputed letters of Paul are all about, but seemingly more sophisticated in substance and style, this letter could be, but could also not be, of Paul's own hand and mind. Whatever. It's got good stuff on offer, today's reading notwithstanding.

I'm not going to lie to you: all the readings set out for this week are duds. Maybe somewhere some congregation is benefitting from a preacher who managed to wring gold from the base medals that are the lectionary readings for Proper 14, Year

B. But you won't be so lucky. No such alchemy took place during my week-long worship prep. And I tried.

Our gospel reading, from John, features Jesus continuing in his discourse about being bread. "I am the living bread," he's remembered this week to have said, "the living bread that came down from heaven." It's the third Sunday of five Sundays during which we'll hear him claim to be bread, a fact that had one lectionary blogger entitle her entry on this passage, "Not Another Bread Passage, Please!" and we're only halfway through. It's significant, this image; it's suggestive and theologically substantive. It's just that this week's passage is especially obtuse.

One of the Old Testament readings features the accidental death of David's son, Absalom, who had also become David's enemy. It was a death, therefore, that David had longed for, and had made war over. But then, when it happened, David regretted it and deeply grieved. It's a long story, it's not an uplifting or particularly enlightening story, and I had two funerals to officiate yesterday so I wasn't up for trying to see what might come of this third sad death.

The other Old Testament reading, the one we heard, has an eye on Elijah who had lost all hope. A prophet of the Lord at a time when the whole nation of Israel was under the rule of Ahab and Jezebel, and so worshipful of the god Ba'al, Elijah held fast in his faithfulness to the Lord. This had Jezebel order his execution, and had him on the run. When we find him a day's journey into the wilderness, he is sitting under "one broom tree," which is, incidentally, a species of tree that grow in groups and so its "oneness" can only be understood as to underscore Elijah's isolation.

Fleeing into the wilderness, of course, has him in company with Hagar, Abraham's long-ago slave and mother of his son with her, Ishmael. The fact of Ishmael had Abraham's wife, Sarah, envious and possibly bloodthirsty, so Hagar took flight with the boy, thinking this was her safer bet. But once out there in the wilderness, she became convinced that both would surely die out there in the wilderness.

Fleeing into the wilderness also has Elijah in company with Jonah, another prophet who exiled himself when facing circumstances that filled him with dread. His is a comical story. Remember, it features a whale swallowing him up, bringing him to the place where he's supposed to be, and then vomiting him out. And the plant that

he sat beneath for shade? It shriveled up in the sun and left him exposed. He complained about this until God spoke up, saying essentially, “Really? Really, Jonah? Don’t make get another whale after you.”

Fleeing into the wilderness also, and most obviously, has Elijah in company with the whole people Israel, fleeing Egypt but then nearly starving as a whole refugee camp—that is, until the Lord sent quail for them to eat as meat and a sticky substance that covered the ground every morning but would melt away by midday. “What is it?” the people asked, and so it was named manna, which means, not “bread” as we might suppose, but “what is it.” Manna means, “What is it.”

It was a provision of God, of course—something God provided for the people that they might be sustained and nurtured. So, what is it today that sustains you? What is today your daily manna, your daily bread?

For the people Israel, “what is it” was a sticky substance. For Elijah, “what is it” were cakes baked on stones and left for him to find once he woke from sleep—left by angels, the story claims, and whether the angels were of the heavenly sort or a more earthly sort matters little to me. By whatever means the Lord provides, those provisions I’d hope always to welcome in. The fact that Elijah welcomed them—welcomed food when just days earlier he’d prayed to die—is striking. He had regained the will to live.

We don’t speak much of providence anymore. Even the word strikes an antiquated note in my hearing—and I imagine I’m not alone. Consider that this theological concept used to have a whole section in hymnals, as it does in our *Pilgrim Hymnal*. Not so, though, in the *New Century Hymnal* (though I don’t mean to give you one more reason to hate that hymnal; it’s a great hymnal!) Providence feels like a notion out of fashion.

So it’s been funny to find myself thinking in terms of God as provisional, God as providing. What we have in this world that gives life shape and meaning, what we have in this life that allows for civilization and for human thriving: these are provisions of God—provided to us but also provisional among us. These things, even those that seem so fundamental (governments, economies) will not last forever. These things are temporary, passing away—which is both good news and also

distressing news. The distress comes because so many of us benefit from what social structures, what physical structures, we've built. But the good news lies in the inconvenient truth that many, too many, don't so benefit, indeed might even suffer. The structures of civilization: many fit within them, and many don't.

Do you know what Jesus' first spoken words were in the Gospel of Matthew? "Let it be so for now." This he said to John just prior to John baptizing Jesus. John objected to this, saying it didn't seem right that John should baptize Jesus rather than the other way around. Jesus' reply was, "Let it be so for now." These he spoke to a specific circumstance in a particular conversation. But ever since I preached on them last, a year and a half ago now, they've stayed with me as words that carry some greater theological truth—that God works in the world provisionally, providentially.

"Let it be so, for now." This *speaks* to me, agitated human that I am, one who'd too easily let the perfect be the enemy of the good enough. This speaks to *me*, restless creature that I am, one who can often barely tolerate all that's so glaringly wrong—and with everything, with the whole world—and yet can do so little about it all. "Let it be so, Liz," Jesus might be saying to me, "you silly, nervous, woodland creature. Let it be so, for now." As for later, though, as for tomorrow, wait, watch, work for something better, something even more good than what is let to be for now.

You know, the revelation to follow Elijah regaining his will to live is when God shows him a windstorm and yet is not in the windstorm, and then shows him an earthquake and yet is not the earthquake, and then shows him a great fire and yet is not in the fire, is only in the sheer silence, come to him as a still, small voice.

A whisper, you might wonder? God, whisperer? God, a god-sib? If so, then one that builds up.

This is the distinction to be made, according to the writer of this letter to the Ephesians. This is the distinction: that which distinguishes falsehood from truth, that which distinguishes between evil talk and talk that is useful for building up so that the words spoken may give grace to those who hear. There is, of course, a difference between wrangling, slander, malice; between bitterness, wrath, anger; a difference between these and kindness, tenderheartedness, graciousness.

The question to hold in mind is what makes the difference? You can speak of “black people” with racist overtones or merely as a neutral fact (though also a nuanced one: race, the say, isn’t real, though *racism* is all too real). You can use the word “queer” with derision or embrace. You could speak about me behind my back simply as someone you know who’s up to something noteworthy or as someone so annoying you dine out on all the ways.

{}Some time ago, I officiated at a funeral for someone who had died in prison. (Funerals were apparently much on my mind this week.) A young man he was, and it was parents who called on me—sweet people, living gently. Their son’s crimes had all been committed locally—non-violent offenses against friends and neighbors, in his hometown and in surrounding towns. He was several years into his sentence, and had but a couple yet to go. His death was sudden, unexpected.

In working with his parents, it became clear to me that they had landed in a prison as well, a prison of sorts. They were isolated from their social group because many in their group had been victims of their son’s criminal activity. Knowing, then, that some held them now in contempt, they assumed that all did and so they nearly entirely withdrew. The stigma was too much. It was just easier to stay in.

I asked them if I could hold their son in prayer, even public prayer, here. Could I name him? Could I name him here from this pulpit? After all, he’d been named in the newspaper, time and again. He’d been named in court, at his trial, at his sentencing, where his neighbors and victims showed up to press for a tough sentence. And he’d been named in other, less formal contexts, I’d bet—in grocery store aisles, at water coolers, maybe even at a few coffee hours in church fellowship halls. Could he then be named here?

I thought perhaps to do so, to begin to speak his name but now in a worshipful way, would release them, if only a tiny bit, from their isolation, would remove the stigma, if only a small piece.

And I knew, of course, that we could handle it. I knew that no one here would delight in his downfall, would glee at their humiliation and grief. I knew that we’re a people who live by grace, who rely on forgiveness, and who believe in Christ as one who said such things even to criminals: “Today, you will be with me in paradise.” So I

wondered, can what's been used for gossip be redeemed and held as if among god-sibs?

No. Last I knew they couldn't have that be. I just had to let it be so, for now.}}

I have another friend who suffered a sudden death, this of her daughter. We prayed for her here in church, and I told others about her loss. When I saw her partner once at the gym, I told her that I'd been telling people who I thought would want to know. I said I hoped that was okay. Her partner said, "Oh yes, that's what she wants. She wants people to know. But she can't take being the one to tell everyone. It's just too exhausting."

What she wanted was a god-sib.

I can relate. There have been times when I wanted people to know about events in my life that for whatever reason I hesitated myself to tell. Good, bad, it didn't matter. I remember the feeling of whatever it was being simply too big for me to carry it in through the door. I wanted it already to be here when I arrived.

I pray that this place a place for god-sibs. I pray that this pulpit is a dispenser of holy news in peoples' lives, news that they're not here to share, news that they're too tired to share, news that tempts either pride or shame but means simply to be news that we might know one another well. I pray that here we share what we've heard about those whom we care about in a spirit that builds up.

If that's what we accomplish, then thanks be to God.