

July 29, 2012

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

2 Kings 4:42-44; John 6:1-21

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Faith in Faithless Times

One of my pantheon of saints is a man who died a few years ago called Edwin Friedman. Among his writings are a book of parables and one of those parables is called *The Bridge*¹. It is the story of a man diligent in pursuing what he wanted out of life on his way to a critical appointment. As he crossed a bridge he noticed someone approaching from the opposite direction. This stranger had a rope tied around his waist and asked very politely whether our man would mind holding one end for a moment. He took the rope at which point the stranger jumped off the bridge and demanded that our man save him from death. A conversation ensues in which the stranger refuses to take any action—even the smallest action—that could lead to his being able to regain safety. Eventually our man says “I will not assume responsibility for your life. Either you start pulling yourself up while I am the counterweight or I will let go of the rope.” The stranger responds “How could you be so selfish as to let someone die?” And our man says “Very well. I accept your choice.” And he lets go of the rope.

I share this because one of the questions that comes up fairly frequently for our clergy and others around here is how we can best and most faithfully respond to those who come to the office door almost every day in search of some kind of help or another that always amounts to financial assistance. How should we respond? We do not have available, nor have we chosen to develop, the resources to do social work. Cuts in governmental spending over the last twenty years or so mean that there is really no single entry point for societal assistance. There is nowhere effective that we can send someone for the kind of help that really learns a story, and offers effective, appropriate assistance. We don't have the resources to do that work and we don't want to become part of the system.

What we actually do now is have one of us assigned to be ‘the responder’ and we respond if we are available. We could, if we chose, spend every waking hour responding. And we know that the network on the street is such that if we respond first thing on a Monday morning we can stay busy all week. Sounds good but what it means in practice is that our front desk volunteers and Marie-Louise Muhumuza become the front line saying “I'm sorry, there is no one available to help at the moment. When will there be? I'm afraid I have no idea.” Desk volunteers hate talking over the intercom to people in need and saying “no.” They hate it because need is persistent and the needy in their desperation can become demanding and appear belligerent. It is not fun.

¹ Edwin H. Friedman, ‘The Bridge’ in *Friedman's Fables* (Guilford, 1990) p. 9-13

The bottom line is that we do not want to become part of the system through putting band aids on real need. Nor do we want to say “I’m sorry. We are a church that doesn’t help the likes of you as a matter of policy.” We want to leave open the possibility of grace from time to time.

We live in an age not unlike the age of Elisha. If you have been involved in any conversations regarding the Transportation proposals on which we are asked to vote on Tuesday, you know that one of the drumbeat themes of those conversations appears to be that many people oppose the T-SPLOST as it is called because they don’t trust those in government to do the right thing. You’ve read about the “price fixing” of the London interbank rate by which banks lend to each other. That can seem pretty remote until you realize that the LIBOR, as it is called, affects your life in many ways. The whole banking system is built on trust and if the news outlets are to be believed, we don’t really trust our bankers much, at least not the ones we don’t know. Religious institutions aren’t immune either as ever more people describe themselves as “spiritual, not religious.”

In Elisha’s time God had cursed Israel because of the idolatry of its rulers. Drought, famine, plague, pestilence and death are all around, and God sustains the faithful through the prophets. The people often had nowhere to turn. The story of the barley loaves and fresh ears of grain being enough to feed the people is told in part in order to show that Elisha is a worthy successor to his mentor Elijah. But it also shows grace in abundance when we take responsibility for ourselves and for those around us rather than looking to the systems we set up to ensure salvation. The man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing the first fruits of his work to the man of God. Pointedly, he did not take it to the priests of Baal. He sought true life and found it among followers of Yahweh. But Elisha did not take responsibility for sharing and allotting his gift. Instead he told the man who had the instinct of faith to act on it fully. “Give it to the people and let them eat.” Somehow there is blessing and abundance when we are faithful.

This means a couple of things for us when we respond to people in need. It means that those of us who work here will continue to resist offering responding as part of a systemic expectation, or a sense of entitlement. (I really don’t like being told “You are a priest and you are supposed to help people”) and once in a while allow grace to be present for all of us which happens in those moments where there is some kind of genuine exchange—some kind of relationship in which there are two parties and the stranger has some modicum of responsibility for his or her own life. When we can respond with some serendipity, then kindness, genuine interest, conversation and sometimes even money can be matters of abundant grace. That is a word for any of us, at any time, who are approached by people begging for help. (Incidentally, someone who says he has broken down on the highway with his family and just needs a few dollars for gas or towing or a motel or whatever is lying.)

The second thing is for us as a church. This is a community filled with stories of the most marvelous grace. You are going to hear one at our pot luck supper on September 9th. You probably have one to tell. But when you think about stories of grace, the church might have been the occasion, the impetus, the excuse or the circumstance for abundant grace, but the provider is always God alone. Some of you have heard me say that I

believe the church is a rather leaky chalice from which grace somehow notwithstanding and nonetheless is poured out. When we read and hear about the demise of the church (which Noelle addressed last week), fear not for God will find a way to feed the people who are hungry. Just so, sometimes when we are in the midst of fear, depression, anger, guilt and the like—times when we cannot pray and the very best we can do is to go through the motions of being faithful, then grace can appear in the smallest acts of kindness and mercy: a smile on the street, a call from an old friend, an invitation. All Saints' will be here for generations to come, but it is only as WE are faithful, feeding one another, awake to those time when we find we can respond to the need around us—that grace will abound. So do not despise banks, political processes, government, religious institutions or any of the other manifestations of the way we have ordered society, but do not look to them for salvation either. Feed one another in every way you can and there will be plenty left over, for with fidelity, grace abounds.

In silence and in response to the gospel, let us pray...