

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

2 Kings 4:8-11,14-16a

Romans 6:3-4,8-11

Matthew 10:37-42

Today we hear an obscure passage from the Book of Kings. It seems random and somewhat out of place but, in fact, it speaks to us amid the unusual circumstances in which we are living these days. It is a story about the prophet Elisha, who is the successor to the more well-known prophet, Elijah. However, it is interesting that many biblical scholars identify Elisha as a foreshadowing of Jesus since, like our Lord, he was both a teacher and a miracle worker.

Anyway, the setting of this story is in the northern part of Israel. We hear that Elisha comes to a little town called Shunem and he dines at the home of a wealthy woman. He is so inspired by her great hospitality that whenever he comes to town he stops there to eat. The woman is so pleased with his presence that she arranges a room for him with a bed, a table, a chair and a lamp. Moved by her generosity he asks her servant if there is some thing he can do for her to repay her kindness and the servant tells him that she would like to have a child. So, Elisha tells the generous woman, “This time next year you will be fondling a baby son.”

This is a charming story but what does it mean? How does this obscure passage in the Old Testament relate to our life amid this weird time in which we are living? As I have said many times before, I never thought there would come a day when public Masses would be temporarily suspended and our world would basically shut down. As your pastor, I only know how to relate to you in person. The sacraments were never intended to be “virtual” or live-streamed. They are “outward signs, instituted by Christ, to give grace” in person! Being separated from you is strange and disorienting. And even now that public Masses are resuming and people are coming back (gradually) it’s still not the same.

In a similar way, you were alienated from the Church and from the routine you had grown accustomed and to the Eucharist. As your pastor, I bring certain things to you—preaching, the sacraments, and, of course, the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. But you also bring a lot to me. Your presence, your faith, your questions and doubts, your pain and sorrows, your joys and triumphs. As a priest, I derive much of my energy from the people I serve and you, in turn, receive the consolation and support you need from the Church as you live your life as disciples in the world. Let’s just admit that the separation we experienced this year (and are still experiencing to some extent) is not good for either one of us.

Bishop Robert Barron refers to this story of the Shunemite woman and the prophet Elisha as “an icon of the relationship between the priest and his people.” In the time when this story took place, travel was difficult and dangerous. Most of it was done on foot through dusty and dry places. Living in Oklahoma, we can relate to the dry and dusty part but most of our travel is done in air-conditioned cars and jet planes (or more recently, more and more on bikes). Elisha didn’t have that luxury and like many people of that time he had to rely on the kindness of strangers to get him through a long journey. So, it must have meant the world to him to find this family in Shunem who was willing and able to take him in and give him a meal. And, we can tell from the story, that his presence brought them so much joy that they went to the added expense of arranging a place for him to stay in their home. To them he brought the presence of God into their home and into their lives.

The two of them fed each other. They cared for each other. Each gave the other refreshment on the journey of life.

I’ve been a priest for 23 years and I’ve always had a place to stay because of the kindness and generosity of lay people like yourself. You put a roof over my head and food on my table. I look around at our parish and I see all the improvements and renovations and we have done over the past three years and none of it would have been possible without the generosity of the people of this parish and even some people who don’t even live here but believed in what we were doing and wanted to be a part of it.

Humbly, I know that what I have done and will continue to do, as your pastor, will hopefully benefit you and your family and our parish. It’s why I do what I do and it’s why I’m a little lost when you’re not around. I want to serve you. It’s why I became a priest. But you offer me so much more than what I can give. Your kindness and support help me greatly and our mutual commitment to Christ and our love of the Church keeps us together despite the challenges we face. We need each other.

The coming together of clergy and laity is meant to bring grace and a sense of holiness to the world. And that is why St. Paul writes to the Romans in the second reading, “Are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.” Together we live for God in Christ Jesus. He is what unites us and sustains us.

One of the great tragedies of our time is not only the separation between clergy and laity as a result of the coronavirus, but also the suspicion brought about by those who failed to serve the people entrusted to their care, especially the vulnerable. And the secularization of our culture that does not see Christ and our relationship with his Church as essential or necessary is leading people away from the things that truly matter and leaving people feeling empty and lost and unfulfilled.

My brothers and sisters, we need to stick together now more than ever. We need to recognize that no matter what divides us we are all united in Christ. We share each other's burdens and we celebrate each other's successes and together we take up our cross and follow Christ until he comes again and we are all one in him forever.

Very Rev. William L. Novak, V.G.

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