

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time – 11 July 2010
Sermon by Rev. Emily Rose Martin

2 Kings 6:8-14

⁸Once when the king of Aram was at war with Israel, he took counsel with his officers.

He said, "At such and such a place shall be my camp."

⁹But the man of God sent word to the king of Israel, "Take care not to pass this place, because the Arameans are going down there."

¹⁰The king of Israel sent word to the place of which the man of God spoke. More than once or twice he warned such a place so that it was on the alert.

¹¹The mind of the king of Aram was greatly perturbed because of this; he called his officers and said to them, "Now tell me who among us sides with the king of Israel?"

¹²Then one of his officers said, "No one, my lord king. It is Elisha, the prophet in Israel, who tells the king of Israel the words that you speak in your bedchamber."

¹³He said, "Go and find where he is; I will send and seize him." He was told, "He is in Dothan."

¹⁴So he sent horses and chariots there and a great army; they came by night, and surrounded the city.

2 Kings 6:15-23

¹⁵When an attendant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. His servant said, "Alas, master! What shall we do?"

¹⁶He replied, "Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them."

¹⁷Then Elisha prayed: "O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see." So the Lord opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw; the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

¹⁸When the Arameans came down against him, Elisha prayed to the Lord, and said,

"Strike this people, please, with blindness."

So he struck them with blindness as Elisha had asked.

¹⁹Elisha said to them, "This is not the way, and this is not the city; follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom you seek."

And he led them to Samaria.

²⁰As soon as they entered Samaria, Elisha said,

"O Lord, open the eyes of these men so that they may see."

The Lord opened their eyes, and they saw that they were inside Samaria.

²¹When the king of Israel saw them he said to Elisha,

"Father, shall I kill them? Shall I kill them?"

²²He answered, "No! Did you capture with your sword and your bow those whom you want to kill? Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink; and let them go to their master."

²³So he prepared for them a great feast; after they ate and drank, he sent them on their way, and they went to their master.

And the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church

Thanks be to God.

This is one of my favorite stories in the whole Bible. Partly because it's such an oasis of grace in what can be a pretty grim and violent couple of books—1 and 2nd Kings. And partly because it's so surprising.

The first surprise comes when Elisha's servant steps outside to find their small city surrounded by Aramean troops. I can only imagine what that servant must have been thinking when Elisha said to him, "Do not be afraid; there are more with us than there are with them."

I know what I would be thinking: "Ok, it's official. Elisha has lost his mind. That pastoral 'non-anxious presence' thing doesn't really work when armed soldiers are galloping toward you at full speed." But Elisha prays for eyes to see God's reality, and lo the Aramaean troops are surrounded and outnumbered by God's horses and chariots of fire.

We think we know the facts. And we think we know what the facts mean. And then a prophet comes along and turns our world upside down. The ones we thought had power are shockingly vulnerable. And the ones who seemed so small, doomed even...they have the advantage. I don't know if that's comforting or deeply disturbing. Maybe both.

But before we can recover from this first game-changer, Elisha surprises us again. Instead of calling down those horses and chariots of fire, he blinds the Arameans and leads them into the heart of enemy territory.

Elisha prays again (that seems to be his go-to battle tactic), and the soldiers see, to their great dismay, that their power and security was an illusion, that they are not in control.

And that is a scary, scary place to be.

But Elisha is not finished—the King's eyes too need opening.

The King wants to kill his Aramean prisoners, and he's got a pretty good reason, even aside from their being at war. The last time the King of Israel showed an Aramean prisoner mercy, he was condemned and cursed by a prophet!

But nothing in this story is what might expect, and Elisha surprises us again. "No," he says, "these are not your prisoners to kill. Set food and water before them and then let them go."

This is not standard operating procedure. General Petraeus does not invite Al-Qaeda to lunch and then let them go. Enemies learn from experience not to trust one another. So why this departure?

The text doesn't tell us why. Maybe Elisha considered them to be God's prisoners, and his orders came from that General. Or maybe Elisha considered the prisoners his. And maybe he had finally had enough of that endless cycle of retaliation and violence. Maybe he was tired of being the The King of Israel's early warning detection system. Maybe he was ready to spend his time and energy doing something else. The text doesn't tell us why.

The text also doesn't tell us what that meal was like. Now maybe the Arameans ate in fear and in silence, while the Israelite soldiers watched with narrowed eyes. But I'd like to think that no good feast of the king would go unenjoyed by the king and his top advisors. I'd like to think that over the course of the meal, somebody, maybe an Aramean, broke the silence by accidentally knocking over his wine glass. And someone else, maybe an Israelite, reached over to help mop up the spill. And someone else complained about this awful heat wave they'd been experiencing, and everyone nodded in agreement. Maybe an Aramean and an Israelite both reached for the last olive with the same gusto—laughing in embarrassment as their hands touched.

I don't know what transpired at that meal... the text leaves that to our imagination. But something good must have happened because what the text does tell us is the miraculous thing that happened after:

THE ARAMEANS NO LONGER CAME RAIDING INTO THE LAND OF ISRAEL.

Is it possible? Can one moment of grace at the table change everything? I so want that to be true. And I believe it was true, it can be true... for a time at least.

But the very next verse shatters any illusions we might have about an easy lasting peace. "Some time later," it says, "King Ben-hadad of Aram mustered his entire army; he marched against Samaria and laid siege to it." The siege lasted so long that the Israelites began eating each other.

No, one meal shared among enemies might give us a glimpse of the kingdom, but it will not provide a lasting peace. Table fellowship isn't a gimmick. Peace isn't a once-off miracle. But maybe it is a practice.

This is a sticky time for a Presbyterian minister to be interpreting a text that involves the nation of Israel at war with one of its neighbors over the land. Lately, Presbyterians have been in some pretty hot water with our Jewish brothers and sisters over our Middle East Committee's recent report to the General Assembly. Most mainstream Jewish organizations found it to be one-sided and pro-Palestinian.

The Christian Century's most recent issue accused the report of bearing false witness against Jews and failing to root out lingering anti-Semitic interpretations in their biblical analysis. They noted with lament that the kind of dialogue with Jewish theologians and rabbis that went into preparing the Presbyterian Statement, *People of God*, about ten years ago, was strikingly absent from this report.

Now don't panic; there is some hope. It seems to me that over the past week the General Assembly Committee dealing with the offensive report did actually listen to these critiques, and made some important changes to make the report more balanced. Commissioners on that committee even testified to the presence and movement of the Holy Spirit in ways that allowed people of differing opinions to reach consensus, and not only that but to truly feel a unity in Christ. Some of them even got choked up talking about it.

But it still remains to be seen how our Jewish brothers and sisters will interpret our actions. And some damage has already been done. The Jewish outcry against our initial report spoke powerfully to me about the need for continued dialogue. Continued relationship.

It made me grateful to be in the midst in a congregation that I know values building those relationships and having those dialogues across all kinds of differences. I know that many of you have engaged in classes and discussions at the Institute for Christian and Jewish studies. I have been there myself a couple of times. But I worry about the temptation to believe that our reconciliation work with our Jewish brothers and sisters is done.

In the process of writing this sermon, I realized with some embarrassment that I had a follow up meeting request from Rabbi Greenspoon of Beth El Congregation that has sat in my Inbox unanswered for more than a couple of weeks now. It was so easy to let my schedule fill up with other things.

Meanwhile in analyzing the results of our Adult Education Survey, I discovered a very high interest in learning about Islam. And I share it. But this recent controversy made me wonder... could my increasing interest in Islam also reflect a decreasing commitment to building and maintaining meaningful relationships with my Jewish colleagues?

Have I too easily assumed that I could ride the wave of other peoples' hard work at reconciliation? That centuries of Christian anti-Semitism could be so easily overcome?

What this text reminds me of, is that peace and reconciliation require constant effort and attention to personal relationships if they are to last. And that there's no better place for that work than at the table. Perhaps that's why Jesus spent so much of his time eating with people. There's something about sharing a meal that is also about sharing our humanity—our hungers, our likes and dislikes, our messy lives.

When I think about breaking down walls while breaking bread, I think of my grandfather and the men's group that he's a part of. They meet together every Wednesday morning for breakfast. They are Republican and Democrat. Presbyterian, Baptist, and Atheist. They are ministers and businessmen. And each week they take turns presenting on some topic related to politics, religion or ethics. Occasionally, they even invite a young woman like myself to present. But though they have heated and lively discussions, they have learned to love one another and to trust one another.

Real reconciliation is about relationships. And relationships take time, trust, and continuous effort. And I think that goes for all relationships. With family members. With fellow congregants. And with those with whom we seek to be reconciled—Jews, Muslims, people of different ethnic backgrounds or political views, even our own Christian brothers and sisters with whom we disagree. And sharing more meals together probably wouldn't hurt. In fact, sharing a meal can be a great time for relationship building. After all it's hard to say that that you don't have time to eat!

Someone asked me once if all the young adults do when they gather is eat together or if they do anything else more educational. But what the Holy Spirit keeps reminding me of is that for us Christians, there is no “just eating together.”

When we break bread together, we build communion. We share in our common humanity; we share the messiness of our lives. And as someone reminded me recently, the deeper we go, the scarier that is. The greater the risk that we will be hurt or that we might hurt one another.

But we need not be afraid. Because when we break bread together, when we share meals with strangers we hope might one day be friends, we also remember the one who broke bread with us, so that we might know God’s love and forgiveness. We remember the one whose body was broken so that the walls between us might come crashing down.

Can a moment of grace at the table change everything? Yes, it can. But only if it’s habit-forming. We have to keep coming back to that table. We have to keep inviting others to join us. We have to accept their invitations.