

7 PENTECOST
JULY 2/3, 2016

FIRST, MARSHALL
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1 Kings 19:1-18; Romans 7: 14-25a; Mark 14:32-36

Too Heavy to Carry

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Step 1: We admitted we were powerless over ... (sin) – that our lives had become unmanageable.
Step 2: Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
Step 3: Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God.

Step 4: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
Step 5: Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
Step 6: Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character



Oftentimes in life we find ourselves at a fork in the road, facing a big decision, facing a point of **no return**. Unlike New Year's resolutions that can slip through our fingers like so much sand, I'm talking about those critical moments when change is thrust upon us, like it or not.

Five years ago in Anchorage, I had my yearly physical and was told by the doc that I had high blood sugar. He wanted to put me on medication, which he said I'd have to then stay on for the rest of my life. I asked him if I could control my blood sugar by changing my diet. He gave me a look that was both skeptical and challenging, shook his index finger at me and said, *You get **ONE** chance!*

My doctor was the voice of the LAW, right? And it was a law that I would ignore at my own peril.

At other times we find ourselves facing change because someone speaks to us a word of GOSPEL. Twenty-five years ago I was a smoker. Then one day at school our son learned about the dangers of smoking, came home and proceeded to beg me to stop. There was no skepticism in his eye or challenge in his voice, just an aura of fear-mixed-with-love of what could happen if I didn't stop. Pure GOSPEL.

So, though change can happen either by a voice of the LAW or by a word of GOSPEL, the truth is that we repeatedly find ourselves at that

fork in the road because our lives are marked by the effects of sin. We are constantly being commanded or asked to:

- STOP smoking/drinking/cheating/lying,
- START working out/working hard/working well,
- STOP spending/wasting/indulging,
- START saving/helping/serving,
- STOP holding on to ancient hurts,
- and START living in the freedom of God's forgiveness and love.

The truth is that we'll never get this LIFE-thing right simply because we all have an ache in our hearts, a hole in our spirits, an emptiness in our souls that we can't fix. And here I'm talking about the basic human ache-from and addiction-to SIN; that strange fascination we have with, and destructive pleasure we take in, letting SIN damage our lives.

True, the 12 Step Program started as a way to address the destructive power of alcohol and other drugs on people's lives. But those are just **two** agents of pain on a list of examples that is **endless** – they run across the whole spectrum of sin.

Where some people struggle with too much self-righteousness,
 others struggle with too much self-LESS-ness.

Where some are guilty of sins of omission (when our inaction
 causes others to suffer),
 others struggle more with sins of commission (when our actions directly
 cause people to suffer).

But in the end...it doesn't really matter, does it? Sin is sin, and ultimately, it'll come home to us – encumbering us with a weight that's too heavy to carry, a load that's too hefty to shoulder, a burden that's too bulky to bear alone.

*I do not do the good I want,
but the evil I do not want
is what I do.*

Romans 7:19

And lest we think that we're above all that sort of sin stuff, the Apostle Paul confesses for us, and for ALL humanity:

I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.

(Romans 7:19)

Did you ever look at yourself in the mirror and say, *Why did I do that, or say that, or think that???* Well, if those words ring true for the great St. Paul, then I'm pretty sure that they're true for us all...

Especially since they were also true for the great prophet Elijah! His story is incredible. We meet him in today's lesson which occurs just after an amazing event in Israel's history.

Here's the backstory:

King Ahab and Queen Jezebel are doing a terrible job of ruling the nation. Here's how rotten they are: they've rejected the One True God and worked to establish worship of the false god Ba'al as the official religion of Israel.



Elijah gets sick of the whole mess and proposes to the rulers a duel of sorts – between himself and the priests of Ba'al.

Here are his rules: on the mountain top, each team will build an altar and call upon their Deity to consume it with fire. Whichever G(g)od answers will be the God that Israel worships. On Ba'al's side: 450 priests. On the Lord's side: 1 prophet.

Elijah lets the pretenders go first – and they make a grand show of it: they build their altar, they sing and dance and pray and prance. It's a gig that goes on for hours and hours, and culminates with a dramatic closing act: all of Ba'al's priests mutilate themselves to show their devotion.

And what happens to *their* altar? Exactly: nada, nothing, nichts – their so-called god stays silent, so finally, they call it quits.

Next, it's Elijah's turn. He builds his altar...stands back and shakes his head as if...something isn't quite right. So he digs a trench around it, and then douses everything with water – not once, not twice, but three times he soaks the wood.

Now, it doesn't take a Boy-or-Girl Scout to know that dousing wood with water will not help it burn...the only thing I know that can start a fire with wet wood is what we used to call *Scout Water* (gasoline!).

But then I think that's Elijah's point. The only way such a water-logged altar will burn is if God himself causes it to happen. So finally, Elijah's ready, so he stands back and prays:

“O Lord, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel...so that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.” Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench.

(1 Kings 18:36-38)

Elijah then has those priests of Ba'al put to death, which does not put him on the *favored guest list* at the palace – in fact, he hears that **now** there's a price on **his** head. So he flees into the desert – frustrated that even though he won the contest, it doesn't look like anything's going to change.

Out in the wilderness, Elijah becomes depressed and slips into hopelessness – where fear starts to take a toll on his heart.



Here's a question for you **medical** people in the congregation. **What does a prolonged effect of FEAR do to our minds, our bodies, our spirits?**

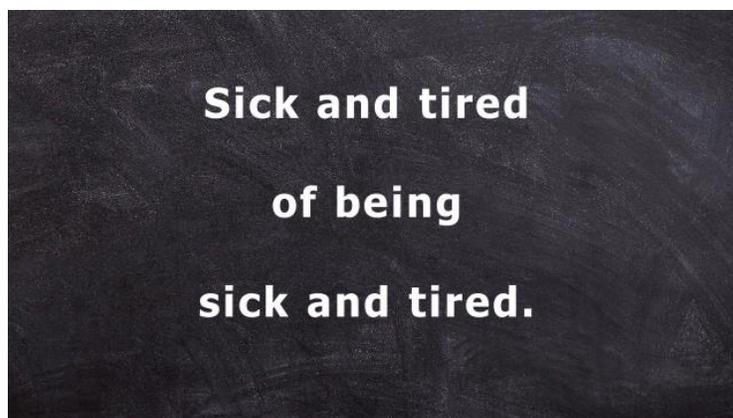
Exactly! Fear can cause us to become twisted up in knots, and locked away in a prison of our own making. It can be a demon whose strength is legion and whose crippling efforts are magnified the same. In short, FEAR is no less than the ARCH-ENEMY of FAITH! It drains us of the spiritual energy we need to function – not only when we're forced to face a crisis, but also in the midst of life's everyday challenges.

So this is where we meet Elijah in today's bible story – he has fallen from a victorious, powerful prophet to the shell of the man of God he used to be. In fact, as you heard read in v. 4, he actually gives up and asks God to take his life. It had become unmanageable, and he is consumed with a hopeless fear: his burden is far too heavy to carry.

Well, the Lord sends angels to feed Elijah, not once, but twice (God must be part *Norwegian Mom* – “*Eat something, you'll feel better!*”).

After eating, the prophet is able then to make his way to Mt. Horeb. But there the Lord asks him a strange question: ***What are you doing here?***

Elijah answers (19:10), “*I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.*”



Elijah is *sick and tired of being sick and tired* [*which is, by the way, the title of a good book on alcoholism and co-dependency*]. In short, Elijah refuses to lay down his burdens – he does NOT want to hold on to them, but neither can he let them go. He can't help it.

Says Paul: *I can **WILL** what is right...but I can't **DO** it!!!* (Ro. 7:18)

Well, God refuses to coddle the prophet. Instead, he commands him to stand in the mouth of the cave and witness God's holy presence. In a scene that just **screams Hollywood**, we're told that Elijah first experiences a **WIND** that's strong enough to split mountains. Then he suffers through an **EARTHQUAKE** that shakes him to the core, and finally a ferocious **FIRE** – all three of which you'd expect to be seen as earth-shattering introductions to God's mighty power...

Yet ironically, and wonderfully, **God is not present in ANY of these displays** of awesome power: CRASH, BANG, BOOM, and God says, I'M NOT THERE!!!...(whisper) *But I **am here*** ...only in the sound of sheer silence...



What is the blessing for us when God speaks ONLY in the silence?

It allows us to BE SILENT, to SHUT OUT THE NOISE OF THE WORLD, and, ultimately, it allows us TO LISTEN TO GOD.

God refuses to explain himself to Elijah, just tells him to get up and get going – that there’s still some work to be done. But he does throw the weary prophet a nugget at the end. *Good news*, says God – *you thought you were alone in this fight? I gotta tell ya, there are 7,000 souls in Israel who have refused to worship the false god Ba’al!*

Elijah’s burdens were too heavy to carry...because he thought that he was all alone in his struggle.

Only after the angel brought food and drink to Elijah, and after God spoke to him on the mountain in the silence, only then did the prophet begin to *get it* that God had been with him – and would continue to be with him – throughout his life.

That’s what happens when we refuse to let go of our burdens. It denies us the ability to find sustenance for our spirits, and it denies us the ability to hear in the silence of life NOT God’s absence, but God’s mercy, grace and truth.

It denies us the opportunity to draw strength from those 7,000 (or 250!!) other people who will comfort, console and bless us – even as we then, can do it for them.



Sacrament and silence.

Food and drink for the journey ahead – *Take and eat*, says Jesus, *take and drink...this is my body, this is my blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sin.*

The body and blood of Jesus Christ, the water that washes us clean of sin, the blessed silence of being in God's presence – all of these are great gifts that can address our addiction to sin, that can free us from refusing to let go of our heavy burdens, and that can free us to trust that God will take care of them (maybe even better than we can ourselves!!).



The Apostle Paul's cry and the end of our passage from Romans is, I hope, the prayer that is always on our lips every day of our lives.

Having taken a complete moral inventory of his burdens, he then asks, *Who will rescue me from this body of death?*

But instead of following in the footsteps of Elijah and wallowing under the weight of his woes, Paul brings it home where it belongs. Without even taking a breath, he answers his own question with that beautiful confession: *Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ!*

This is living the life of the 6th step: being *entirely ready to have God remove all our defects of character*. This is living a life of *freedom!* For when we reach this realization, truly the power of sin to make us cling to our burdens and give up on God, its power to drive us to despair is completely broken.

In Galatians 5, verse 1, the Apostle Paul sums it up for us beautifully. He tells us, *For freedom, Christ has set us free.* Amen.

Too Heavy to Carry... Children's sermon

pail with rocks, can't hold the pail by myself, need help to pull out the rocks, each one marked with a commandment:

- other gods -swearing -Sabbath -parents -murder -adultery
- stealing -lying -covet people -covet things