

Sustenance and Difference
Based on 1 Kings 19:1-8 and Gal 3: 23-28
Rev. Dr. Nicole Wilkinson
Cape May Presbyterian Church
June 19, 2022

I want to talk about both of these scriptures this morning, even though they don't seem to have much in common with each other. I want to talk about the sustenance that we hear about in 1 Kings and the unity across difference that we hear about in Galatians, because I think there's a connection between those two things. But it's not a well-traveled road that makes that connection, so fasten your seatbelts.

Throughout the biblical tradition, we are shown a God who feeds us. From the plants in the garden of Eden to manna in the wilderness, to the barley fields in the Book of Ruth to the prophet Elijah here in 1 Kings, and on to Jesus breaking bread for thousands and sharing his body with the twelve. God is provider, mother and father. The one who makes sure we have what we need, to get where we need to go.

“Get up and eat,” Elijah is told, “otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” Elijah despairs of his calling, wants to join his ancestors in death. He asks God please to let him die. But God essentially ignores Elijah's lament. God ignores Elijah's desire to die—does not answer it with words or argument, but only with life-giving food. God provides water and some kind of bread, from nowhere. And like a doting mother, God insists that Elijah eat. *Eat, you need your strength!* So Elijah eats, sleeps, and eats again, and then is able to travel for forty days and to get where he needs to go. A little nourishment goes a long way.

As the church, we want to do that for our neighbors. Not to pretend to fix whatever problems they may have, but to make sure they have the resources to continue on their journey. It's the mission of the Food Closet, of Lazarus House, of Branches, of Family Promise, of Habitat for Humanity. To provide nourishment and shelter, so that people can get where they need to be, so that people have what they need to struggle on in their life's journey.

But here's where we move from sustenance to difference. Different people have different needs. I raised twin infants; I know that this is true. One baby would eat all the pureed sweet potato you could shovel into his mouth and then some; one of his first words was “muffin.” The other one, you were lucky to get a couple spoonfuls in during the brief time he would tolerate sitting in his highchair--and one of his first words was “down.” There was no way to feed them the same things in the same amounts. As hard as it was for me to get my mind around, I didn't have to, because that they actually had different needs. Apparently, because they both survived and I'm happy to say that they now feed themselves.

When the Food Closet gets ready to serve its clients, they do not give each person exactly the same bags of food. These days they let the family shop the rolling shelves, getting what that family needs and will eat, making sure there is mac and cheese for the family with little kids, and vegetables that those particular kids will eat. Every client gets about the same amount of food,

per person; but every bag of groceries is different because every person coming through the door is different.

The apostle Paul tells us, in the middle of a bitter argument he is having with the church at Galatia, that we are one in Christ. That the differences we have lived out in the rest of our lives, do not apply once we have been baptized. It is a revolutionary statement and one which the church still struggles to live up to--that neither gender, nor social class, nor ethnicity affects any Christian's relationship to another. That none of that has anything to do with our relationship to God. "28There is no longer Jew or Greek," Paul tells us, "there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." It's a revolutionary statement now; imagine how it would have been heard in the Roman Empire of the first century. No longer slave nor free? What exactly does that mean? Christians should no longer own slaves? Or slaves cannot be treated as slaves within the church community? And don't even get me started on male nor female—we are still trying to figure out how to live that out. In fact, we're still trying to figure each part of it out.

Paul says the differences do not exist within the Christian community, or rather they do not exist once we are baptized. But of course, people continued to be male and female within the churches he served. The enslaved were still enslaved—baptism didn't free them. The thing is there is a tension in what Paul says. We are one, across all differences of ethnicity, class, and gender. We are united, but we are not the same.

We would all like to believe that our differences do not matter. At least, we would like to believe that differences like gender and ethnicity or race don't matter. That we don't see color, that we don't care about class. You'll notice it is almost always white people who say they don't see color. Black people see color, because they have to, in order to navigate society. Just like money doesn't matter to those of us who have plenty of it; money matters a great deal to those who have none. Any difference only seems unimportant to the people who are on the winning side of it.

Sometimes in our well-meaning desire to be one body, we forget the very basic fact, that life is simply harder for some people than for others. On a good day, we can appreciate other people's music, other languages, other legends, even other scriptures. What's harder to understand is other people's different attitudes, based on their different lived experience. Life is harder for some people than for others. Maybe more importantly, whatever struggles we've overcome, wherever we are in the class, gender, ethnicity setup, it's almost certainly still true that life is harder for some people than it has been *for us*. Maybe that's really what we struggle to get our minds around. That other people, because of where they've been and what they've been through might need more nourishment, more care, more consideration than we do ourselves.

People talk about this country as a melting pot. But it just occurs to me to wonder, what's *in* a melting pot? It's definitely not food. Food doesn't melt, unless it's butter or chocolate. Apparently, the idea was melting metal. I looked it up--thank you, Google. There was a play around the turn of the last century, and it featured the following line: "America is God's Crucible, the great Melting Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming!"

Wow, *God's* crucible, no less. But listen to the play's list of "races": "German and Frenchman, Irishman, and Englishman, Jews and Russians..." In fact the idea that Jews and Russians were becoming one was more of a dream than a fact of the era—the play apparently told an unlikely love story between a Jewish boy and a Russian Orthodox girl.

Maybe if you're only looking at German, French, English, and Irish, there was melting going on. But the Italians, for example, stayed pretty darned Italian as far as I can tell. And the Chinese had no chance of melting in—they were legally unable to become citizens for 70 years. And by the way, in the whole melting pot theory, where were the African Americans, exactly? Forbidden by law in many places to marry any of those other ethnicities, forbidden to "melt."

I hope we've all figured out by now that neither our country nor the church is a melting pot, with every different metal added mixing and forming one new substance. When our differences work together, when we are at our best, then we are more like a salad, where the flavors blend and influence each other, enhance and celebrate each other, but the tomato remains a tomato and the spinach stays spinach. Or maybe a stew, if we want to keep the pot but put something edible and nourishing in there. A stew where the meat and the cabbage and the potatoes definitely take on each other's flavors, but also remain what they were when they went into the pot.

Which brings us back to the feeding. We are nourished by our differences, the differences that give flavor to our stew. Jazz is such a great example. It is, as Heather has told us, an American art form. It is in fact an African American art form, coming out of the lament of enslaved people, and their insistence on remaining themselves, on celebrating their own reconstructed culture that had carried them this far on the way, talking about their lived experience. All of us can hear it, though, and hear the harmonies of our own lived experience resonating in the ways it speaks to our shared humanity. Jazz makes us listen to a whole other history, to hear both the sameness and the difference with our own.

Paul says that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. But Paul also reminds us in his letter to the Corinthians that the body of Christ needs hands, feet, eyes, ears. Different gifts and functions, working together. Not to compare them to the Apostle Paul, but U2 once sang, "we're one, but we're not the same, we have to carry each other." We are united but also deeply different. The good news of the gospel tells us that that is possible, to unite across profound differences. Maybe that's what the church has to teach the world. That people can unite across their differences, that we can come together in a salad or a stew, and feed those who stand in dire need of sustenance.