

Hamstrung

Gene McAfee
Faith United Church of Christ
Richmond Heights, Ohio

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“How long will you go limping with two different opinions?” -- 1 Kings 18:21

I take as my text this morning Elijah's famous question to the Israelites on Mount Carmel: “How long will you go limping with two different opinions?” That's from the twenty-first verse of the eighteenth chapter of the first book of Kings. It's also the prophet's challenge to his own people to make up their minds and hearts about their religious convictions. Are they serious about following God – their God and our God – or aren't they?

Whose people are you? Elijah is asking the Israelites, and the question is not rhetorical. The people Elijah is addressing claim to be the children of Israel, and their God was the God of their ancestors – the most famous of whom were Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, whose other name was Israel.

And for us to begin to understand the impact and import of Elijah's question, we need, briefly, to review the larger story of the Israelites, of which today's encounter with the prophets of Baal is a small but dramatic portion.

The people of Israel, our spiritual ancestors, took their name from the third of those three patriarchs I referred to a second ago – Jacob, who got a name change and permanent limp after wrestling with some sort of divine being in the dark of night.

So it's no accident that these limping people on Mount Carmel are the self-described descendants of an ancestor whose most important encounter with his God left him limping. All peoples, in describing their ancestral genealogy, tell stories that reflect their own characteristics – or what they imagine their own characteristics to be.

Generations of American school children, up until the 1970s or so, learned that our spiritual ancestor, George Washington, could not tell a lie. A man named Mason Locke Weems, better known as Parson Weems, appears to have invented that story of George and the cherry tree, since it first appears in a life of Washington written and published by Paston Weems in 1800. But the reason we learned that story was because we like to think of ourselves as honest people, and we want our children to be honest – just like our founding father George – even if telling the truth means we might get a lickin'. That's the way ancestors work – they tell us, for better and for worse, who we are. They are the mirror, cracks and all, we hold up to ourselves.

So it was certainly no surprise to the Israelites that Elijah would ask them how long they intended to go limping with their two opinions about their ultimate loyalty. Were they going to be the Lord's people, with whom they historically had

a rocky and rocking relationship, or were they going to throw that ancestral deity over for their new love, the Canaanite storm-god, Baal? Choose, Elijah said. If Yahweh – that's the Lord's proper name – if Yahweh is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him. But either way, get on with it. Get on with living some kind of life of genuine devotion that makes a difference in the world, because right now you're hamstrung – you're caught between two opinions, both of which you want to claim – and it won't work.

And the reason it wouldn't work for the Israelites – and the reason limping between two gods won't work for us – is because you can't worship a partial god and a real god at the same time. We all want to do it, and we all keep trying to do it, and it never works.

We worship the gods we fashion with our hands while we also want to lay claim to the true God, the real God, the God we know, at some deep level, to be the one and only God, and it doesn't work. Our devotion to that God remains half-hearted, our loyalty to that God remains divided, and our lives, as a result, remain hamstrung.

You can go to museums all around the world today and find statues of the Canaanite storm-god Baal. You can find clay tablets written in the ancient language of Ugaritic that will tell you all about Baal's exploits – his battles with Mot, the god of death, and his relationship with his sister, Anat, the goddess of love and war.

But what you won't find in any museums anywhere are living, breathing, religiously functioning Canaanites, the people who worshiped Baal and Anat and El and Asherah and all the others in the Canaanite pantheon. And the reason there aren't any religious Canaanites left is because, as the New Testament scholar J. B. Phillips would put it, their gods were too small.

The gods of the Canaanites were the gods of rain and thunder and the underworld and childbirth – all aspects of the reality that the Canaanites lived with daily, but none of them the god behind that reality. Religiously and spiritually speaking, the Canaanites never penetrated the veil that hangs between reality and that which is the cause of reality, and the Israelites did, and the Israelites called that reality behind the veil Yahweh. Yahweh, the people of Israel believed, wasn't reality; Yahweh was the reason there was reality at all. That's what their famous creation story in Genesis told them and tells us. To speak of God as creator is to give God the credit and the glory that there's anything at all. The Israelites called that creative reality Yahweh; we call it God.

That's the religion that survived, and that's the religion we claim for ourselves. Not Judaism, which is what the religion of the ancient Israelites evolved into, but a daughter of that religion – a daughter faith called Christianity, whose genius is to ask the same question about reality, this time inspired by Jesus the Christ, and to push its devotees in the same direction, which is to penetrate the veil of ordinary, everyday experience in order to catch an empowering glimpse of the divine reality that transcends mundane reality.

That's what successful religions do – all successful religions, the ones that survive not a few decades but for millennia. They all call us to that more, that transcendent reality that doesn't deny this reality but at the same time never

deifies this reality. That was the mistake the Canaanites made; they deified the thunderstorm and called it Baal. The Israelites, on the other hand, recognized the importance of rain but realized that the God they worshiped was more than rain.

And that's the tension that all of us religious types have to live with: recognizing the importance of mundane reality, on the one hand, but never surrendering our ultimate allegiance to that reality, on the other. This is trickier than we commonly think.

We Christians say, for example, that we worship as God Jesus the crucified and risen one, who penetrated the veil of ordinary reality and said that we find our lives by losing them. But how many of us lose our lives daily in order to find them for him? No, I'm not talking about the sacrifices we make for family and work; that's losing our lives for them, not for Jesus. How many of us lose our lives for the sake of the gospel and not for one of those partial gods that we adore – security, health, family, friends, work, country?

We continue to believe that genuine faith is one of life's add-on's, like the gym or a college education, something we can do for ourselves that might benefit others, after we've taken care of the real business of life, like getting married and getting a job.

But faith is not an add-on. Genuine faith is an all-or-nothing proposition. You're all in or you're not. "I will spit you out," God said to the church at Laodicea in the book of Revelation, because you're neither hot nor cold, and being lukewarm, when it comes to faith, doesn't cut it.

That's what Elijah was trying to say to the ancient Israelites. It's what the Spirit is trying to say to us.