

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, 27 June 2010
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Raggs Ragan, Rector

Today's propers remind us of the challenge of being the community of Christ's followers, challenge both in the sense that we are challenged to live up to this calling and in the sense that it is difficult for us, a challenge.

In the collect we asked to be united in spirit so that we might become a holy temple for God. What does that mean? What is a temple and how do we become one? A temple is a place of holiness, a place of worship, an earthly place that connects people to God.

That makes sense when speaking of a building. We have all experienced buildings that live up to that description for us, either because of our own experience there, like our own sanctuary right here at Saint James, or because of their intrinsic beauty and grandeur, like the National Cathedral, or because centuries of worship have imbued the very walls with prayer, such as the most ancient churches in the Holy Land.

But how can a community be a temple? It seems to me that we are a temple if our community reminds people of God, the way a great cathedral does. We are a temple if, like those ancient church walls, we are saturated with prayer, so that people feel it when they are near us. We are a temple if our existence speaks to all people of God's love. We are a temple if we are shaped by Jesus' example and commandments, the way each place of worship is shaped by what the builders believe and know about God. It is an interesting way to think about ourselves, and to evaluate ourselves. It is not enough to be individually followers of Christ; we are called to be followers together, in a way that affects everyone around us.

The readings remind us of how great is the challenge of being true followers, being the stones which can be built into a proper temple. We first heard the wonderful and dramatic story of Elisha's succession to Elijah. We saw him persistently following as Elijah made his last journey. Elijah knew that his time on earth was ending. He had trained Elisha and felt he could trust him to carry on. Now the aging prophet thought to go on his own for this final adventure, as he had gone on his own into the wilderness in last week's story. But Elisha would not leave him; in fact he was quite a pest. Elijah was tolerant, and let him follow, after offering the opportunity to stay back at each stopping place.

Then the younger prophet asks for a double portion of Elijah's spirit. That used to sound greedy to me, almost as if he was asking to be twice as good a prophet as his mentor. Although his own contemporaries would have understood this to be a request to become the true heir, the successor to Elijah as chief among the prophets, his spiritual eldest son, it still has an aura of selfish zeal about it.

Until we think about the circumstance. Elisha has been called to succeed Elijah as a prophet in Israel, a people who do not want anyone telling them about God's judgement of them and their ways. Remember why Elijah was in the wilderness last week? The bloodthirsty couple of King Ahab and his wife Jezebel have killed all the other prophets, because they do not like what they are saying. Queen Jezebel then promises Elijah that

she will see to it that he is killed as well. Elijah sees his death at the hands of the tyrants as inevitable. He feels that his ministry has been a complete failure. So he goes into the desert to die. Even ministering angels do not convince him that anything but death and failure await him.

Finally, he meets God in the silence after the storm and is given courage to go back into the world, to carry on with God's work.

Elisha knows all this. He has seen Elijah's power and his weakness, his courage and his collapse, his successes and failures. He has to know that this is very hard and demanding work. He knows that he must be willing to face death. No wonder he wants a double portion of Elijah's spirit. He wants some of the faith and courage that enabled Elijah to stay the course.

But of course Elijah cannot give it to him. None of us can give our own attributes to another. We can only be faithful in our own lives, set what example we can, offer our prayers, and know that only God can grant such things. We see that God does indeed endow the younger prophet with what he needs, just as he had with the mentor.

And Elisha is so grateful, he shouts for joy in those famous lines, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" He has had a vision of his Father in God, Elijah, carried off to God in triumph. He knows that now his time has begun, so he casts off his own clothes and dons Elijah's mantle. He is now the one to speak God's word to the people, whether they want to listen or not, whether they will choose to kill him or not. One needs a great deal of spirit to be such a follower of God.

In the short reading from Luke we find, James and John, our very own patron saint and his brother, showing their usual thunderous enthusiasm as they fail as followers of Jesus. While they are with him spreading the news of the kingdom, a Samaritan village fails to listen, so the brothers ask, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" Our text says simply that Jesus rebuked them.

Imagine how frustrated and sad he must have been, to be so close to the end of his ministry and still his closest followers can think he wants destruction for people who do not listen.

In this week's Journey with Jesus, Daniel Clendenin reminds us that in some ancient manuscripts there is another line added to this story. He refers to it as his 'favorite text that should not be in the Bible' – favorite because of what it says, but clearly added by a zealous scribe after the original writing. Some Greek manuscripts add a conclusion to the story: "And Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what kind of spirit you are of, for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them.'" Dr. Clendenin goes on to point out how true the line is to what Jesus was and taught throughout his ministry. That was clearly the substance of his rebuke to the rambunctious sons of Zebedee. "I – we – are never about destruction! We are about salvation, about love and life."

James and John had a hard time being followers of Jesus, but kept trying. It does not seem to have been any easier for the post-Resurrection followers, if we are to judge by the letters written by Paul and his fellow apostles to the early churches. Throughout the Epistles, we find churches succumbing to rivalry and anger and partisanship and mutual disrespect. In today's epistle reading, Paul sums up the whole of scripture, the whole of what Christ came to teach us, by saying: "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

This is what it means to be a follower of Christ, to be a child of God. And it does not seem to have been an easy thing for those first Christians any more than it seems to be for us.

So he reminds them that, just as Elisha needed Elijah's spirit, we need the Spirit of God with us and in us to accomplish our following, to live up to our task. He reminds us that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. ... If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit." This is the Spirit we need to cultivate, to ask for, to live by, if we are to be true followers of Christ, fit stones to be built into a holy temple for God.

So we see this in the abstract, but our lives are lived in particularity. How can I be a true follower today? How do I live out God's love in each moment of my life? This does affect each moment and action of our lives.

For example, I think we all have been wrestling with how to respond to the horrific oil-soaked disaster in the Gulf of Mexico as true followers of Christ. There are myriad possibilities. We can go and wash birds and turtles. We can clean beaches. We can send money to help with efforts such as you find in your bulletin inserts where ERD is helping the people who have lost their livelihoods. We can become informed and try to influence decisions to be more fair and loving. We can figure out how to use less petroleum products, to do our own small part to lower demand.

In every aspect of our lives, we can always be alert for the still small voice, speaking to us about how we can be true followers, true lovers of God's love, true stones in God's holy temple.

To be a true follower requires a heaping portion of Christ's spirit. How fortunate that we have been promised just that.