

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 9

Revised Common Lectionary, Year C

July 8th, 2007

Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

For Special Christians

by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer, Rector

I'm going to do the almost unforgivable today and open my sermon with a joke, and a well-worn one at that. It seems especially appropriate to the theological questions on the table in today's reading from Hebrew Scriptures, and it speaks to a simple but profound truth of what it means to lead a life of faith.

So please indulge me as I dust this one off. And for those of you who know it, you can recite it with me!

There was a notably devout Christian who lived in a modest home next to a small, babbling creek. During a long drought, the creek almost dried up completely. But, when the rains returned at last, they came with a vengeance, as they often do.

Soon the creek was overflowing its banks and threatening the devoted Christian and his neighbors. He got down on his knees and prayed that God might save him from the rising waters when a knock came at the door. A police officer had stopped by, her cruiser parked outside, and she offered to drive the man to safety. He responded, "No, God will save me!"

In the ensuing hours the waters continued to rise until they entered the lower level of his house. The devout Christian barricaded himself in his upstairs bedroom and was praying fervently when a shout came from outside. He rose to see a boat struggling against the current outside his bedroom window.

"Open the window, we'll throw you a line and take you safety!" the pilot shouted.

"No, thank you!" the devout Christian replied, "God will save me!"

The rains were relentless and the creek had now burgeoned to become a raging river. Even as homes were swept away nearby, the devout Christian climbed onto his roof and continued to pray fervently for God to save him from the rising waters. During a break in the storm, a helicopter flew to him. As it approached, a door opened and a voice shouted,

"We'll let down a ladder for you. Come aboard, and we'll take you safety!"

"No," the devout Christian refused, "God will save me!"

A few moments later, his home collapsed beneath him, and he was swept away by the waters and tragically drowned.

In heaven, the devout Christian approached the throne of God with an angry question: "God, I prayed to you for hours to save my life! Why didn't you?"

“My child,” God replied, “I love you and would never abandon you. And, behold, you live with me now forever. But in response to your incessant prayers, I sent you a police cruiser, then a boat, and then a helicopter. . .”

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In today’s reading from the Second Book of Kings, we take another page out of the annals of Elisha, whom you may recall from last week has taken up the mantle of prophecy from his mentor Elijah.

Elisha today confronts two men who suffer from their own sense of pride:

The king of Israel who, not so surprisingly, worries that the request for the services of his prophet might be a reason for the powerful king of Aram to pick a quarrel. . . in other words, the king worries it is all about *him*. . .

And Naaman, the great warrior, who approaches Elisha’s door expecting V.I.P. treatment, and instead is greeted only by a lowly messenger.

Both are so convinced of their own unique and special place in God’s universe that they nearly forget to grasp the grace right in front of them – the king an opportunity to show the power of the God he and his prophet are called to serve; Naaman to be cleansed of his leprosy.

So, let’s cut to the chase. Are you a *special* Christian? Be honest!

I confess that I sometimes suffer from being one. It’s why I wear the special clothes and the collar and stand up in this special place on a Sunday morning. Being a special Christian is an occupational hazard for me as a priest, and I dare say a great spiritual risk for my heart and soul.

Most of us see ourselves as special Christians at one time or another, especially favored by God, extra gifted by the Holy Spirit. It speaks to our insatiable desire to be first. And the world, as secular as it may get, does nothing to help us. Turn on the television, open a newspaper, or surf the internet, and there are enough messages telling us how important we are (and even how more important we will be) if we buy or own a certain something, or live in a particular somewhere, or hang out with the right someone’s.

Our faith tradition is certainly badly infected with this sort of pride, too. Our shared history is littered with bodies both physical and spiritual – victims of our collective sense of self-righteousness. . . of believing ourselves *special* in the eyes of God.

Some of our contemporary Christian communities thrive when they posit our *special* sinfulness and, therefore, Christ’s special grace for *us* which is best claimed with a weekly visit to the “Temple of Redemption.” Sound at all familiar?

Enough already!

There are many reasons Christ sends his disciples out to deliver the Gospel two-by-two. One may well be that then no one of them can then claim special gifts for success or special grace by virtue of the battle scars from the rejection they might encounter.

And Elisha reminds us today across the bounds of religious and cultural history that God either finds us all special or none of us. That we all have a share and claim on God’s grace or none of do. Elisha may

go personally to the nameless widow in distress to lift her up from her shame of invisibility. But he will keep his personal presence from the great warrior to remind him of the folly of self-pride.

While we are each gifted in different ways: some with longer life, others with shorter; some with gifts for gab, others for contemplation; some with music, others with handy-craft; some with large homes, others with small places; some with powerful positions in community, others with quiet and unassuming ones – we are, in a profound and very deep way, treated ultimately by God with equanimity.

And that equanimity is about the infinite love God shows us in Christ and through the Spirit of grace. Another way of seeing this is to remember that we enter this life with nothing, and we depart with nothing – all save the gift of life and God standing at our beginnings and ends.

This is a radical teaching. Make no mistake. If you push it to its conclusion, you discover a strange outcome of Christian faith. The competition ends. We rise and fall together. We are either all sinners of the worst sort, or we are made equally special only by God's love in Christ, and we cannot earn it, achieve it, or pay for it. At our best, we celebrate this grace we all have been given, and out of love for God and one another, are willing to share it with our neighbors.

But most days we suffer from the self-limitation of our competitive and ever-comparing spirits: judging ourselves against others or against yesterday or against – as often in this part of the world where so many of our needs are met and exceeded – the yardstick of “self improvement.” We are hard wired, it seems, to believe ourselves to be special, to curry God's extra favor, as though infinite and self-giving love from the Creator of all Worlds was not enough.

At times, we risk rejecting that grace and grasping something far less for ourselves and our brothers and sisters than God wants for us all. But the Good News is that we are often given grace despite ourselves – like Naaman, who at the insistence of no one greater than his own servants, goes down to the river to bathe and is healed. Or the disciples who take so little into the villages and towns as to accomplish nothing, and yet come away with a profound sense of how God is working through the Gospel they have shared – a Gospel that, in a remarkable way, accomplishes *everything* by restoring life with God and casting out the powers of darkness.

Each week as a community in Christ, we live into this Gospel by setting all of our self-centered striving aside, at least for a moment, when we gather before the altar and take the bread and wine side-by-side with our sisters and brothers: poor, rich, old, young, passionate, indifferent, sad, angry, happy, afraid, joyous. We are no more deserving than they are, and yet no less worthy because of what God has already offered in the way of grace in our lives and in the lives of countless others.

This is one of our primary spiritual practices, and one where we beg for God's transformation: to set aside our notions and craving to be *special*. To live instead into the abundant love for us that comes from before time and that stands ever like a blazing light to shine into our broken and wayward hearts. . .

. . . if only we will let it.