

Sermon Proper 5 Year C by Ron Kolanowski, St. James'

Our stories today again address the theme of God speaking to us from the margins. Isn't it amazing how often this occurs in scripture? In our first lesson and in the gospel God again uses the plight of a widow to make a point.

In the first story the widow is in the midst of a famine and is about to starve to death. Elijah asks for some food from her meager supply and miraculously the jars of meal and of oil do not run empty...there is enough and more than enough. In the second part of this story, just when she escapes the danger of starvation, her son is on the brink of death and dies. To the degree that this woman had any worth or standing in the community it is because she had a son. To lose the son was not only a personal loss, but meant that her own life was now in greater peril. So, then what happens?

Elijah stretches himself on top of the boy and cries out **O Lord my God, let this child's life come into him...**and he returns to life. The prophet brings the child back to life through his powerful touch. Because of this experience the woman encounters the word of God through the prophet Elijah.

Jesus' healing action in the gospel has the same themes. A widow is about to bury her only son. Jesus takes pity on her, and commands the young man, **I say to you, rise!** and he does.

Like the story in 1 Kings, it is Jesus' touch that brings the son back to life. And in similar fashion, the people respond to Jesus' actions in the same way the widow does to Elijah's actions: God is made known in the action, and Jesus and Elijah are proclaimed God's prophets.

The Torah, Jewish teaching, forbade contact with dead bodies. In both stories Jesus and Elijah risk becoming ritually unclean by coming in contact with a dead body. In both stories Jesus and Elijah touch across the boundaries of clean and unclean so that life will be restored. The stories from 1 Kings and Luke provide powerful examples of healing touch based on compassion, not purity.

The notion of what is clean and unclean may seem a point from another age, but the notion of untouchables is very much with us in our world. For example, often, and especially with regard to AIDS, people are regarded as "untouchables" by communities who are afraid of difference."

A colleague of mine from Episcopal Divinity School is from the Church of South India. Benajmine Inbaraj is a Dalit. In the cast culture of India, the Dalits are the people considered the untouchables. Ben used to share stories with me of the plight of many Dalits in cast culture, such as the results of the Tsunami that struck the Indian Ocean on December 26, 2004. He said that some of the relief supplies were being withheld from the Dalits and kept for use by those of upper casts. Not only did many

loss their homes and loves ones, but because of cast practices they had difficulty sharing in the relief supplies—they are untouchable.

In addition to these sad stories Ben told me of an act of protest within the church of South India that speaks against the cast system and reminds us of the healing that can come from common touch and a shared meal.

Ben told be about an inter-communion liturgy that transcended denomination, cast and even boundaries of Christianity.

What happens is that people from across the community gather at church. Each one brings a fistful of rice and drops it into a common pot. It is then cooked, brought into the church and consecrated as communion.

In a highly stratified society, they are breaking all the rules and creating something new. Common rice from homes of all classes and casts, touchable and untouchable alike is placed in a bowl, cooked and becomes Christ's Body, for all to share. The rules of what is clean and unclean are simply ignored and brushed aside. Like Jesus and Elijah who broke the rules by having contact with dead bodies to bring them back to life, this community by refusing to conform to the norms of what is clean and unclean through the simply touch of grains of rice by many hands stand in opposition to societies rules and norms.

This season of Pentecost is all about the Spirit creating something new and different; our job is to attune our ears to what that might be in our very midst in our time.

We are about to baptize Kylie and Ryan Baxter. I am often asked as a priest why we baptize babies because they have not done anything sinful. As a child I was taught that baptism was about washing away the stain of original sin...implying that without baptism we are unclean. Even in our most basic sacrament of baptism there is this idea of clean and unclean. There is nothing unclean about these little children and they are not being taken to an ecclesiastical Laundromat to perform some magic cleansing.

Our catechism teaches that baptism is the sacrament by which God adopts us as his children and makes us members of Christ's Body the church and inheritors of the kingdom of God. Pentecost is about creating something new and in these baptisms what is being created anew is a relationship between the Body of Christ and these children. The Church is the Body of Christ. Rather than making the unclean clean we are establishing a relationship with these children, a relationship that will tell them you are part of this family, this group of folks who profess that Jesus Christ came to save us and reconcile the entire world to God.

What we will shortly do is claim these children for God and in doing so claim them for ourselves...members of Christ's Body...the Church.

There journey doesn't end here, it's only beginning. They now join with us to engage in the work of advancing God's kingdom.

In our readings Elijah and Jesus out of compassion make themselves ritually unclean and bring new life out of death. In the work of my friend Ben and his community common hands touching rice stands against a system that segments people into clean and unclean. In the baptisms today Christ gives new life to these children so they can share fully in the Body of Christ. Pentecost is about the spirit creating new life for each of us. The question for each of us today is how is the Spirit calling you and me to new life?