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Centering on God

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In her book *Waiting for God*, French philosopher, mystic and social activist Simone Weil (1909-43) suggested that authentic spiritual transformation can only begin when people are willing to relinquish their position as the center of things (Penguin Putnam Press, 1951). Weil was of the mind that self will forever be humankind?s abiding idolatry -- ?false divinity,? she called it. For that reason, the denial of self as the center is part and parcel of true discipleship. In a reflection on Weil?s point of view, Thomas R. Steagald described human selfishness as so insidious that it prevents easy detection, and its malignancy so invisible that it prevents easy eradication (*The Abingdon Preaching Annual*, Abingdon Press, 1999). How often we imagine, never thinking ourselves vain, that our wishes are God?s command and that our expectations constitute hope.

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
1 Kings 19:4-8 Psalm 34 Ephesians 4:30-5:2 John 6:41-51

With all respect to Elijah as God?s prophet, we realize that even he was not immune from this all-too-common idolatry. As he sat under the broom tree that day in the desert, his thoughts centered on himself, and in his despair, he prayed for death. All his plans had gone awry. His attempts at purging Israelite worship of pagan influences had been foiled. An angry queen called for his death, and he had fled to escape her wrath.

His mood, as William Bausch has pointed out, is not unfamiliar to us (*Once Upon a Gospel*, Twenty-Third Publications, 2008). Most of us can recite a spate of troubles, individual and communal, local and worldwide, that would make us want to commiserate with Elijah under his broom tree of despair. However, as with Elijah, God challenges us to relinquish our position as the center of all things and to become completely centered on God. By shifting our focus, we surrender ourselves to God, who knows us and cares for us. In God?s good care we will find the strength and the grace to face all our struggles and the spiritual nourishment to serve the needs of others.

As reflected in today?s Gospel, the Johannine Jesus also encountered a certain self-absorption in those he had come to serve and to save. They gladly ate the bread Jesus gave them, but they were unable or unwilling to appreciate Jesus as anyone other than the son of Joseph and Mary, and did not allow their parochial messianic expectations to be broadened or their deeper hungers to be fed by the living bread he offered. Rather than be true disciples (literally ?to be drawn out? of themselves by Jesus), they remained centered within themselves.

At each eucharistic gathering, all present are refreshed and reminded what this great gift signifies. We are fed with the bread of the word and the eucharistic bread. We are challenged to shift our center and focus to belong more closely to God and to believe more authentically in the bread of life. Nourished by this living bread, we become more capable of meeting the challenges set forth by the author of Ephesians in today?s second reading. Bitter rancor is to be avoided; compassion and forgiveness are to become the holy habits of those who profess to belong to Christ. As imitators of God and as God?s beloved children, we cannot help but follow God?s lead in loving the poor, in seeing to their needs and in welcoming them to our own tables to be fed.

To truly live in synchrony with the eucharistic mystery, those who have come to know Jesus in the breaking of the bread -- those whose hearts, centered on Jesus, have begun to burn within them -- are the very ones who are to leave behind the broom trees of our despair and live in hope. Hope in God, hope in the bread of life, hope in the One who prepares a weekly (daily) feast and is revealed anew in bread and wine.

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