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I was only 20 years old when I joined the Dominican Sisters of Caldwell, New Jersey, and some would say I was “green” or “wet behind the ears” or even “naive” in making the decision that I did. Perhaps a grain of truth exists in all those comments, but what I do know is a deeper truth: I followed my heart, and that heart was responding to the Spirit. Begun in 1975, this journey has been rich, full of twists and turns, ups and downs, with times of tremendous letting go, only to be caught up in the marvelous mystery of divine love that has taken my ordinary life and made it extraordinary. At the same time, this journey is grounded in the knowledge that I am and always will be an ordinary person on the road of life, traveling alongside everyone else as we make our way in this world together.

Mission has always been central to my life as a Dominican. I am a biblical scholar, working primarily in the area of biblical prophetic texts, while simultaneously wondering about and interrogating the prophetic text called “life.” My work as a biblical scholar and teacher is more than a career; it is a vocation. Elijah and Elisha are my friends, and yes, they have shared their cloak with me — a woman — often unrecognized by the biblical text but not ignored in the text of life. In 1975, I kissed my father and mother goodbye like Elisha, and I never looked back. In my life, the story from 1 Kings about Elijah and Elisha heard in today’s first reading has found a home.

In the years that followed, the one who has always sustained me and in whom I have always taken refuge in times of challenge has always been the divine presence acting directly in my life and through all of creation. Unlike the portrait of a male deity in Psalm 16, this presence understood by me as Spirit, as Energy, has always sustained me and guided me in good and tough times. In the marrow of my bones, the sentiments of today’s ancient psalm ring true.

Paul’s letter to the Christians at Galatia invites me to think about freedom, law, love, flesh and Spirit. In the course of mission, I have learned that many challenges come our way. These challenges often try to keep us from living the free lives we are called to live. I walk in the company of friends and strangers who repeatedly remind me to “resist” all forms that the “yoke of slavery” takes. Central to my charism as a Dominican, and central to my congregation’s directives, is to work for justice, to live and act justly while living a life of love. My commitment to this vision remains steadfast.

My decision to walk with the Spirit has oftentimes put me at odds with the “law,” only because the law is what has been binding for me and for many others. Working to change the law of our culture has been an arduous task, especially in our world today. Many laws crush the human spirit “on the border” and behind closed doors where legal policies are formed that often discriminate, discredit and erase.

Furthermore, the notion that the Spirit and flesh are opposed to each other reflects a certain philosophical thought and culture of a past time. As a professor of biblical studies and theology, I have the task to help educate people about a healthy understanding of self. Flesh and Spirit work together, allowing people to have an embodied existence and spirituality that celebrates the wholeness and holiness of life in this 21st century world.

Finally, I have discovered in the course of my journey that commitment to mission has its costs. In my own life, challenging the status quo has never been easy. Not being welcomed because of your commitment to mission, while coming to terms with the fact that you don't really fit in with the ways of the world, is never a heartwarming experience. To choose to walk with the disenfranchised, with the erased ones, with those who are discriminated against, and with those whose hearts are, for whatever reason, not able to accept the gift of love, is to live a life "in exile" with so many other people who, in their diasporic state, have nowhere to rest their heads. But, as the Gospel of Luke reminds me and all of us, the journey continues. After 63 years of life, 43 of which have been lived as a Dominican, I continue to walk onward. For sure, one day I will wake up and find my new home in the realm of God.

1 KINGS 19:16b, 19-21

Imagine going about daily, mundane tasks and then suddenly having your life turned upside down in an instant? Well, this imaginary setting becomes the lived reality for Elisha. What a surprise Elisha received while he was out plowing the fields with his oxen. An ordinary day turned into an extraordinary one. He was anointed a prophet and immediately, he was ushered into a way of life that would bring many challenges.

The passage opens with a focus on God who gives a direct command to Elijah: He is to anoint Elisha. Elijah's name means "YHWH is my God." In 1 and 2 Kings, Elijah appears as an individual of remarkable strength and energy. The biblical text puts Elijah in power as a prophet during the ninth century B.C.E. when King Ahab, one of the great rulers of the Northern Kingdom, Israel, was on the throne. Elijah hardly ever questions God or offers any comment. He does the task that has been given to him. A male deity commands a male prophet to anoint another male, thus perpetuating patriarchy, an attitude and culture deeply embedded in ancient Israel's religion and religious institutions and in many religions and religious institutions today. Elisha, the son of Shaphat of Abelmelolah, is to become a prophet and successor to Elijah. His name means "my God saves." Like Elijah, Elisha is depicted in 1 and 2 Kings as having a very full life as a prophet after he is anointed. His anointing by Elijah is significant: The office of the prophet, like the office of the king, is linked to the male gender, with formal anointing by one male to another male. Political and religious leadership at this time is clearly in the hands of males.

In performing the divine task assigned to him, Elijah seeks out Elisha, who is plowing the field. When he finds Elisha, Elijah throws his cloak over him. Symbolically, the mantle is filled with divine power. By throwing it over Elisha, Elijah transfers a share of the divine power to Elisha.

Before embarking on his new way of life, Elisha returns home to take leave of his family and associates by celebrating one final meal with them. Even though Elisha has been anointed, he is not Elijah's equal yet. He is a disciple. The text makes clear that discipleship in a patriarchal culture is a subservient position: Elisha "follows" Elijah, and he acts as Elijah's "attendant."

Thus, this story of the succession of prophecy from Elijah to Elisha links prophecy to the patriarchal culture of the day. By doing so, it affords the males in the community a certain divine power over all members of the community, including women and children. Women like Miriam (see Exodus 15:20) are also recognized as prophets, though the biblical text makes no mention of her being "anointed." A woman could have become a successor to Elijah. Why was a woman not named? Does God have a preferential option for males in the office of religious leadership? Whoever wrote this text seems to think so. Any woman today, however, who challenges oppressive power structures, who speaks out against racism, sexism, clericalism, unequal wages, and any other form of discrimination, and who works to create alternative structures acts prophetically. The story of 21st century women prophets waits to be written.

PSALMS 16:1-2, 5, 7-8, 9-10, 11

The opening verses of this psalm express steadfast trust in God. The person praying this psalm affirms that God, and only God, is "Lord" in this person's life. Although the phrase "My Lord are You," expresses relationship, the word lord is an

appellation for a person or deity who has authority, control or power over others, acting like a master, chief or ruler. This Lord is one's allotted portion and cup who holds fast to one's lot. The phrase implies the unqualified acknowledgement of God's claim on the one praying the psalm and God's care for the person. This Lord deserves to be praised and blessed because this Lord offers counsel even in the night.

The phrases "with him at my right hand" in the second stanza and "the delights at your right hand forever" in the fourth stanza are significant. The term "right hand" is symbolic of power and authority. The signet ring was worn on the royal right hand (Jeremiah 22:24); the elder son received the greater blessing via the right hand (Genesis 48:14, 17); and the position of honor was at one's right hand (Psalm 110:1, 5). The right hand of God performs acts of deliverance (Exodus 15:6), victory (Psalm 20:7), and might (Isaiah 62:8). The right hand of God also gives support (Psalm 18:36). The person praying the psalm not only identifies the right hand with power but also ascribes it to God who gives blessings with this hand (Psalm 16:11). God is now envisioned as a human with hands, one of which wields power and blessing.

Curiously, the right hand becomes the privileged one over the left hand. Throughout much of history, massive stigmas have been attached to left-handedness. Left-handed people have been singled out as everything from being unclean to being a witch. If God is envisioned as being right-handed, then what does this image suggest to people who are left-handed, especially in light of the majority of the world's inhabitants being right-handed? How does privileging the right hand play out in today's culture? Are not many of the devices we use today designed for right-handed people? Does not the biblical text reinforce a cultural bias that has been present for millennia?

Finally, God is a male deity in this psalm, and the poor one who cries out to this male deity is also a male. God saves the men from distress. Support for androcentrism continues, thereby marginalizing women.

GALATIANS 5:1, 13-18

Freedom is indeed a wonderful gift that not all people enjoy throughout the world. For people living in different parts of the world, the rise of authoritarian leaders, the unraveling of democratic governments among some nation states, the persistent and growing problems of human trafficking, domestic abuse, racism, classism, casteism, unjust economic wages, and discrimination because of sexual orientation and gender, are just a few of the many political, social, economic and global situations that enchain people, keeping them from the freedom that is theirs.

This portion of Paul's letter to the Galatians offers a word of hope to various community members today, just as it did for many of the people of Galatia. Today's passage is a clarion call to resist everything that is oppressive, no matter what shape the "yoke of slavery" may take. The second part of the call to freedom is to espouse to a life of love, guided by the Spirit and not governed by the law. Oftentimes the law, constructed by human beings with all their biases and prejudices, is discriminatory and binding. A life lived in union and communion with the Spirit safeguards freedom and sustains an attitude of love for all life, even when the one causing pain and injustice is a "neighbor."

Feminist commentators point out that the exhortation to serve one another through love is a noble task, but it can also be detrimental to one's being, especially for women who are socially educated to be engaged in service roles. Many women have been taught that their true happiness lies in their service to others. While women are serving others, men are often pursuing their own interests and careers.

Loving one's neighbor as oneself is said to be the fulfillment of the law. This act establishes community. In *Global Bible Commentary*, Nestor Oscar Miguez argues that "the law of loving your neighbor is the only law that endures because it builds relationships Our neighbor is neither a competitor nor a threat, but an occasion to define freedom as service." Miguez argues further that "freedom begins when [a] real neighbor — especially the poor, the weak, the needy — becomes the motive for [one's] actions, when individualism is overcome by community." Miguez links freedom, love and service and thus, the exhortation to serve one another heard earlier reinforces the idea that this exhortation extends to both men and women.

With respect to the notion of "flesh," an argument can be made that it is not the human body or materiality. In *Women's Bible Commentary*, Carolyn Osiek says that "Flesh" is "the human ability to put self in place of God, to resist God's spirit. While this is Osiek's interpretation, Paul's letter does reflect a binary attitude toward the Spirit and the flesh. More appropriate for today is a focus on embodied spirituality, with the spirit and flesh working together.

LUKE 9:51-62

This story features Jesus' Galilean ministry coming to a close. Jesus' days on Earth will soon end. Jesus is unwavering in his decision to complete his mission. The focus is now on Jerusalem, and Jesus is "going up" both literally and figuratively. The journey from Galilee to Jerusalem takes place under the shadow of the cross. In the Bible, Jerusalem has many symbolic associations. Jerusalem is known as "God's Holy City," the "City of David." Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E. and then rebuilt and destroyed again in 70 C.E. People from Jerusalem listened to Jesus, and women from Galilee followed him all the way up to Jerusalem (Mark 15:40-41). On the other hand, opponents of God's prophets and messengers and of Jesus come from Jerusalem. Jerusalem kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to the city.

On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus experiences a lack of hospitality from a group of Samaritans in one of their villages. The main source of hostility between Samaritans and Jews was a longstanding argument about where God was to be worshiped. Samaritans maintained that the proper place to worship God was on Mount Gerizim. The Jews insisted that it was in the Jerusalem Temple (John 4:20). Such differences led to Samaritan inhospitality toward the Jews. James and John want to respond with a punitive action. Jesus, however, chooses not to act violently; he just moves on to another village. In doing so, Jesus embodies the lesson he taught his followers on the plain (Luke 6:27-36).

The three scenarios of the would-be disciples capture the point of the Gospel. Strains of the Elijah-Elisha story are apparent in this passage. To enter fully into discipleship means to commit to a lifelong and life-giving relationship. Such a commitment demands the constant moving forward without looking back to what was or was not accomplished. It also entails letting go of those relationships that would hinder the freedom to move the mission forward and to move forward with the mission.

Of the three persons whom Jesus invites to follow him, the first one is impulsive. He is willing to follow Jesus wherever Jesus goes. Surprisingly, Jesus does not encourage him. He gives him a warning instead. The other two would-be disciples want to take care of home matters before they cast their lot as disciples. Discipleship and its related missionary activity, that is proclaiming the reign of God in word and deed, demands a certain single-heartedness and single-mindedness (Luke 14:25-33).

The Gospel sends forth the invitation today, whatever stage we find ourselves in. The important point is to embrace justice, righteousness, lovingkindness and steadfastness.

Planning: 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

Today, we go back to green vestments for the Sundays in Ordinary Time, though we've been using them on weekdays for the past two weeks. Planners rightfully breathe a sigh of relief once Lent, Triduum and Easter have passed, but it is important not to view these "ordinary Sundays" as days that need little preparation.

This week also brings Independence Day in the U.S., which suggests some interesting links with the readings this weekend. The readings seem to revolve around themes of freedom and commitment. Those may seem like opposites, but true commitment requires a high degree of freedom.

Our first reading shows how that truth played out for Elisha the prophet. Called by Elijah, he soon recognized that he had to free himself from his belongings and his past life if he was to commit to the prophetic ministry. (And the resulting barbeque makes most Fourth of July cookouts look puny!) You might recall a line from Kris Kristofferson's "Me and Bobby McGee" (also sung by Janis Joplin): "Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose."

We see the same pattern in the Gospel, but with less happy results. Jesus calls two people to follow him, but their prior commitments keep them from accepting the call.

St. Paul puts the challenge before us clearly: “For freedom Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.” It would seem that those who have been set free would naturally preserve their freedom, but experience reveals that this is not the case. We all too easily slip back into slavery, perhaps to a different master, but slavery nonetheless. The psychologist Erich Fromm wrote a book published in English in 1941 titled *Escape from Freedom*. In it, he examines how our desire for security drives us to abandon freedom, describing the rise of Nazism in Germany as an example. (For a summary of his thinking, search “Escape from Freedom” at www.wikipedia.org)

Fromm makes a key distinction. We tend to think of freedom as “freedom from” — from rules, from restraint, from obligations. We want to be free to do whatever we wish, with no one telling us what to do. But the Bible more often speaks of “freedom to” — to serve, to love, to commit, to follow the Gospel.

Preachers could well explore this difference in homilies this weekend. Planners might keep it in mind, too, as songs are chosen and prayers are composed. Look for songs that invite commitment to God and to service. Pray for the wisdom to use the freedom God gives us for the common good rather than for selfish pursuits. Draw on Paul’s language: “But do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh; rather, serve one another through love.”

Prayers: 13th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

That we are all called to follow Jesus is no surprise. This sacramentally-sealed call is operative for as long as we live. We also know that accepting it has implications we will only discover as we go. Today’s readings remind us that calls can be unexpected, demanding, even dangerous. But Paul assures us that freedom, love and the Spirit’s guidance are all part of it.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you chose dangerous, difficult paths on your journey: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you challenged others to follow you without hesitation: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, your call to follow comes to each and every one of us: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray for all who are called to difficult journeys and tasks.

Minister For the church as it struggles with the meaning of discipleship in every age and especially for its call to accountability, transparency and reform at this time in history, we pray:

- For those hesitant to engage in living the Gospel fully, who may be reluctant to let go of what is comfortable; and for a willingness to change, we pray:
- For the courage to examine what love of neighbor really means in this divisive time, especially when we are called to love those with whom we disagree, those we fear, or those who have hurt us, we pray:
- For all whose discipleship calls them into the public arena — who risk their reputations and lives or take difficult stands on behalf of the common good, we pray:
- For those who follow the call to discipleship through caring for those in need, resisting injustice, or dealing kindly with difficult people, we pray:
- For those in extreme poverty or danger, those with overwhelming medical or psychological problems, and those whose call to follow Jesus may consist of putting one foot before the other each day, we pray:

- In gratitude for those who encourage us to look beyond ourselves and push beyond our limitations, without whom we might miss the Gospel call, we pray.

Presider Loving God, you created us for the love and freedom to which Jesus calls us and the Spirit guides us. Grant us the desire and courage to respond to whatever call is uniquely ours. We pray in the name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.

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