**Divided Loyalties**

Narrative Lectionary

November 3, 2019

1 Kings 18: 17-39 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Mark 9: 2-4

I have a confession to make. I enjoy playing Candy Crush! For those of you who don’t know it is a game of matching candies mostly in threes. There are boosters that can help you in your play and sometimes you can get extra boosters or lives by watching an ad. One of the ads that I saw this week was of a woman who was promoting this method that helped her move her real estate business into a 7 figure salary. That’s a million dollar level. She promoted downloading a free resource that would reveal the three tips to success: Relevancy, omnipresence, and intimacy. It struck me as a rather interesting use of words, especially omnipresence, a word often used to describe God always being present with us. Now it is a business term to help you become a millionaire. Success measured by financial gain. Is this one of the idols of our time that can distract us from focusing on God in our lives, that divides our loyalties, or prevents so many from fully committing to God?

The Israelites of Elijah’s time had divided loyalties as well. Elijah was calling them out because they were following both the idol of Baal and God. It was time for them to make a choice. Elijah accuses them of “limping with two different opinions” and asks if they are with God or Baal. It reminds me of Jesus telling the people in that you cannot serve God and mammon or wealth. We need to make a choice. King Ahab, the king at the time, had married Jezebel, from Samaria, and with her came the idol worship of Baal. The Northern kingdom had already been worshipping idols and so the king instituted Baal as the god of the kingdom. The country had been in drought for a number of years, believed by followers of the God of Israel to be the result of their idol worship. Baal was also seen as a god of storms and rain and so was not providing what they needed. Elijah is the only prophet of God left in Israel and is tired of seeing the people waffle between following God and following Baal. He says to them, “How long are you going to sit on the fence? If God is the real God follow him. If it is Baal. Follow him.” It was time for them to choose. Elijah then challenges King Ahab and his large group of prophets to find out which one has power by setting up a duel to see who’s god will respond.

In the story of Elijah, when we look at it in total, he missed the boat on compassion. He set up a competition between himself and his rivals. God did not ask him to do this. He thought he was acting on behalf of God. Elijah taunts and bullies the prophets of Baal, when they get no response to their prayers. When Elijah prays and asks, God did respond, but then Elijah, even though in his prayer he asked God to give the people another chance at repentance, orders all the prophets of Baal to be killed. A horrific response to the situation and certainly not in line with the God we know. It is these kinds of stories that turn people off of the Old Testament and religion. However the full story is that God dismisses Elijah as prophet in the next chapter, telling him to anoint Elisha as the new prophet. The key point is that in spite of Elijah’s tactics and behaviour, God does respond, to draw the people of Israel away from idols and back to God.

What are our idols today that can distract us from focusing on God and being spiritually present? Sometimes we may be committed to one thing, but we are so enmeshed in the system that it can be hard to live out.

We may want to make ethical purchases and buy products that support the workers who made it, but it can be hard to know or find out whether this is the case.

We may be committed to addressing climate change but are still dependent on vehicles, and live in communities dependent on non-renewable energy and resources.

We may be committed to diversity and not being racist, but are challenged by our privilege and how unconscious racism can be.

Life is not easy, but we can know that God is with us through the challenges, as we seek justice and living with compassion and that God is forgiving and gracious.

When Elijah was ready for the fire he never asked God to bring fire to the altar. He named who God was to all of the people, and asked for an answer so that the people would know that the Lord is God. The fire came, more powerful than necessary, the people saw God’s power and recognized that the Lord is indeed God. When Peter, James and John saw Jesus shining in radiance as he spoke with Elijah and Moses, they knew that the Lord is God and experienced God’s power. When we are faithful and live faithfully people can see that love and power of God shine in us as well. Friday night, for Film & Faith, we went to see Harriet, the story of Harriet Tubman who was a slave in Maryland who ran to Philadelphia to be free, and then worked with the underground railroad to bring slaves to freedom. She was a strong woman of faith, and had a profound sense of God guiding her, having visions that would help her know where to go or what was coming. There was a black character named Walter in the movie who was helping the slave catchers, living with divided loyalties between the white slave catchers, who paid him and his people. He witnessed how Harriet, or Moses, as she became known, guided the people away from the slave catchers, and he saw her strong faith. Walter, turned and wanted to help her, and said to her: you seem to know God quite well – maybe you could introduce me to him? Her example, strength, determination and faith, led Walter to want the same and he turned away from his wrongdoing. God is indeed God.

Have you had experiences in your life where you knew, God was indeed God? Where you witnessed through the example of others, that God was indeed God? Elijah brought people to a place where they were ready to decide, he did not try to convert them. The church has no greater task than to move people to a willingness to choose God. What can you do to help that task along? How are you living so others can see God at work in you? It can be as simple as love, compassion, forgiveness and grace. Then again, sometimes it’s not that simple to live. Modernity has made many in our communities skeptical and not attentive to God’s power or action in our lives. Many believe God isn’t real or isn’t active in the world or our lives anymore. However, I imagine you can name times when you have experienced God – we just don’t talk about it much. Maybe it’s time we do. Maybe it’s time we are bold about our faith and live with pride that we know, God is indeed God. Or if you are not feeling that faith, then maybe we can be open to seeing or experiencing God in others. Or that we can witness the example of faith and God in others.

May we feel confident in knowing that God is indeed God and resist the idols of the day that can steer us away from being faithful and divide our loyalties. May we know that God is with us, as we work through the challenges of living justly in unjust systems. And may we live as people of God, people of faith, people of the Way, that God’s light, Christ’s light may shine through us, for all to see.