

August 12, 2018

1 Kgs 19:4-8; Eph 4:30 - 5:2; Jn 6:41-51

I think we can all get to times where we feel like Elijah in the first reading. Things are not going well, he has done good and been faithful, and now people are hunting him down to kill him. He runs away into the desert and he is at the end of his rope, he says to God: *This is enough, O Lord! Take my life* - he just wants to die. Like Elijah we can be feeling alone and unsupported, heading across a desert where there is no refreshment in sight, wanting to give up - we all get there sometimes. We should all be there to support each other. I prayed and reflected a lot about our parish while I was on my retreat, and I wanted to speak to all of you today to share where I see that we have come in the last year, where we are going, and what today's scripture readings have to offer us as we move forward.

I have listened to many of you over the last year, and there is a lot I have still not heard - the more I hear the more clear things become. The merger of the parishes was a process of sacrifices, challenges, losses, and gains. All really lost their parish as it was before. To those whose church building was closed you lost the space that had such a deep place in your memory, for those whose buildings were retained to form Annunciation Parish you had to face the reality that this building was not only the property of one segment of this new community anymore - it belonged to all the Catholics of Gardner now. In some cases the response to these losses was to try to assert the uniqueness of four historical communities in the worship spaces and culture of one parish and thus unknowingly establishing barriers. Many other people have either reacted in various ways to the tensions present, however, I am very encouraged by those who have worked patiently to build a new community - a community that can sustain all of us through difficult times and draw people to God.

Through the prayers and good will of many, God has intervened. The tension has greatly lessened in the last year. However, we all have to be honest as to how we are each may be continuing to keep up barriers or hold on to and nurse hurt. We can't act nice and still hold resentment in our heart - it won't work, and we will not truly be at peace. I know a man that 50 years after a merger of his parish with another is still angry about it and resentful towards a whole group of people who did not decide to have their church merged either. I don't want to see anyone in such a lack of peace decades from now. Everyone is really in the same boat - either your church was sold, or it was taken to form a new parish. Regardless of any of the messiness that has occurred, no one here or at the Diocese really asked for this situation.

But the solution now is not to blame others or hold anger for the Bishop or your neighbors here - this is not what Jesus teaches us. Elijah didn't ask to be in the situation he was in, and often we are

placed in situations that we did not seek out. I'll bet for Elijah things were going along fine when he was the head of the Lord's prophets, when he had his own place, when he was the center of the worship of the Lord. He certainly didn't want that to change. But things do change (as any of you who are passing mid life and beyond will agree). Elijah could not go on by himself - what was going to get him through it? The message in our readings today is clear. God provides the ability to continue along a difficult journey. In the first reading, Elijah is approached by an angel who gives him a mysterious food that gave him the strength to walk for 40 days and find peace when he reached the Lord on the holy mountain. In the Gospel Jesus tells us that he is the bread come down from heaven - that like the Manna that the Israelites ate in the desert, gives us the strength to go on each day. In our Eucharist we receive what has been called "the bread of angels" - the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. This was what Jesus was talking about in the Gospel. He himself is the bread, that like that mysterious bread the angel brought to Elijah, can make the impossible (like traveling for 40 days on one meal) possible.

In the past year we have made progress in two main areas: First we have greatly stabilized the financial and legal situations left over from a complex merger of four parishes (more needs to be done, but we are on the right track). Our business functions, financial operations, parish office, and communications are all improved. Connected to this, the Staff meet regularly to coordinate, the Finance Council has been able to have a larger and decision-influencing voice, and we have established a Pastoral Council to help guide my pastoring. In addition, we have sharpened our website and bulletin and our school has stabilized and is beginning a comeback. Secondly, we have established several new ministries and have seen an increase of people coming to worship at Mass and a greater level of involvement in ministry - this is vital if we are to grow and be fruitful in the Lord. As a Church community, if we are just an efficient business and social club, but not a community that participates in the mission of Jesus Christ to praise the Father and minister to the world, we will die. Connected to Jesus, and enlivened through the Eucharist as one body, we will grow and prosper - giving God what is due and bring good to the community and the world.

Moving forward let us all continue to ask for the healing that each needs. I am excited for the future, and I am glad that I'm here. As we pray and move our hearts in love closer to each other let's head the words of the second reading which apply to us as much as they did when Paul wrote them to the community at Ephesus: *All bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, and reviling must be removed from you along with all malice. And be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ. So be imitators of God ... and live in love.* Peace be to you all.