

Lift Every Voice
Unitarian Universalist Church, Columbus, Indiana
January 16, 2011

I Kings 19:9b-18

Sermons preached on the story of the prophet Elijah, told in part in this morning's reading from I Kings, usually focus on the conflict between Elijah and the prophets of Baal, and Elijah's victory over them; or on Elijah's flight into the wilderness to escape the wrath of Queen Jezebel; or on Elijah's encounter with God in the "still small voice," which the NewRSV translates as "a sound of sheer silence." But there is another facet of this story that has incited my thinking for this morning. It has to do with those who are missing from the story. It has to do with those voices we do not encounter when we read this story. I refer to the "seven thousand in Israel" whose knees had not bowed to Baal, whose mouths had not kissed him, who had not succumbed to the worship of vain idols.

There is a somewhat pathetic side to Elijah in this story. When God first asks him what he is doing, hiding out in a cave in the wilderness, Elijah protests his faithfulness to Yahweh, then complains, "the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." The note of self-pity and self-righteousness is unmistakable. Despite Elijah's victory over the 450 prophets of Baal, despite his success in getting all the people to slaughter them en mass, Elijah presents himself as vulnerable and alone.

Then comes the drama of the wind, the earthquake, and the fire, followed by the "sound of sheer silence." It is a powerful, moving passage, yet Elijah seems unmoved. The voice of Yahweh asks him again, "What are you doing here?" and he answers exactly as before. Today we might say that Elijah was suffering from burn-out. He had expended all his energy, depleted his confidence, exhausted his hope. And perhaps most importantly, he had lost sight of the resources that were still available to him and his people. At the conclusion of God's instructions to him, God says there are seven thousand who will be left in Israel who have not bowed their knees to Baal. There is still a people worth saving, a people for whom he has not been a prophet in vain.

Why is it that people who see themselves as faithful to God often fail to notice that they are not alone? By temperament and vocation, the true prophet is bound to experience loneliness and rejection. There are not many who feel called to take the risks, bear the burdens, assume the tasks and responsibilities, of the prophet. But prophets need to know that they are not the only servants of Yahweh – or whomever or whatever they understand the Ultimate Source of their existence to be. There are many others who have not succumbed to the temptations of the age, nor yielded themselves to false gods.

One of the challenges for people of conscience and faith is to give voice to those among us whom we might otherwise ignore. We need to lift up all those voices that might otherwise go unheard.

Without these voices, we lose sight of the full range and possibility of divine presence in our world. The ultimacies of our existence are not present only in church, only on Sunday morning, only among those who profess some form of faith in terms we hear and understand. That with which we ultimately have to do is not to be found only where we recognize it, only as we encounter it, only as we struggle within it, only as we are open and willing to serve it. The plenitude of our existence, all that blesses and sustains us, all that we experience as gift and grace and challenge and demand, are not lost on everybody who has not linked arms with us in common cause. We are not alone in being agents of divine service or world transformation.

Part of what I am saying is widely recognized in many religious communities. We have often been told that we are called to lift up the voices of those who are on the margins of our society. We think of the poor, the disadvantaged, the oppressed. When I was a parish minister I was periodically charged with the ordination and installation of new elders, that is, those who would have responsibilities to lead and govern the congregation. In the Presbyterian BOOK OF ORDER there is a section on the duty of elders. Elders, I read, are to "visit and comfort and care for the people, with special attention to the poor, the sick, the lonely, and those who are oppressed" (G6.0304). These are persons whose voices especially need to be heard, and not just because they have special needs. It may be that they have special insights as well. But it is often easy to ignore them. They are often not able to speak for themselves, not able to claim our attention, not able to make themselves visible or audible to us.

The BOOK OF ORDER also says that elders "should inform the pastor and session of those persons and structures which may need special attention." We tend to think here of those persons and circumstances within the life of the church that need special attention, and some sort of pastoral care. But we might also think of those persons and structures in our world that would otherwise go unnoticed, neglected, or ignored. Those who matter are not just those of us who belong to each other. Those who are engaged in divine service, or work of ultimate meaning and value, are not entirely encompassed by our circle of companions.

A few years back – actually fifteen years now – one of the contributors to a denominational magazine to which I subscribed, raised the question, "Where Is the Voice of Compassion?" [Vernon Broyles, PRESBYTERIAN SURVEY, January 1995] He had in mind the then-current preoccupation in our public life with cutting taxes, and hence cutting services, to many of the most needy in our society. His column could have been written yesterday. I don't have the exact statistics, but over the past fifteen years the income gap has kept growing wider, the wealth gap had kept growing wider, the number of people and families in poverty keeps growing, and now the number of people teetering on the edge because they cannot find a job is larger than it's been for decades. We're approaching the ten-year mark of an almost invisible war in Afghanistan, which, together with the war in Iraq, has resulted in tens of thousands of young men and women returning home severely damaged – if not in body, in mind and spirit. Many of them will never have a normal life. And this is not to mention the many hundreds of thousands who have lost their lives in those conflicts, and the millions whose lives have been disrupted, often beyond restoration.

It seems to me that everyone who cherishes membership in the human community has a perennial calling; it never goes completely away. We are called to lift up the voices of those who do not fend well for themselves. There are many in our society--the homeless, the mentally ill, the disabled, sufferers of AIDS, the unemployed, the imprisoned, as well as the disadvantaged and the poor--whom we are not encouraged to spend much time thinking about. But dare we ignore them? It would be self-righteous to write them off. It is self-pitying to complain of the demands they place upon us. How can we possibly think honestly of ourselves as a human community apart from them? Surely we must find ways to lift their voices with our own, to help them to be heard. And we are called to be a voice of compassion for them.

Martin Luther King, Jr., whom we honor tomorrow, was such a voice on behalf of those whom our society keeps trying to exclude. We remember him especially for his non-violent struggle to obtain equal civil rights for all African-Americans, but the scope of his prophetic ministry was much larger than that. He was a partisan not simply of his fellow black Americans but of the human race, an advocate for justice and compassion on behalf of all who were being crushed by the power of the dominating social, economic, and political interests of our time.

But King also understood that the voices of the poor, the disadvantaged, and the oppressed were not the only voices that needed to be heard. In a sermon on nonconformity, which was surely in some ways autobiographical, King declared, "Human salvation lies in the hands of the creatively maladjusted. Today we need maladjusted men like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego"--you may remember them, the three Jewish fellows whose story is told in the book of Daniel because they refused to worship the statue of the king of Babylon--today we need maladjusted people like them "who, when ordered by King Nebuchadnezzar to bow before a golden image, said in unequivocal terms, 'If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us . . . But if not . . . we will not serve thy gods'" ["Transformed Nonconformity," STRENGTH TO LOVE, 14].

King concluded his sermon by saying,

We must make a choice. Will we continue to march to the drumbeat of conformity and respectability, or will we, listening to the beat of a more distant drum, move to its echoing sounds? Will we march only to the music of time, or will we, risking criticism and abuse, march to the soul-saving music of eternity? More than ever before we are today challenged by the words of yesterday, "Be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind" [ibid., p. 15].

We here today are challenged by these more recent words of yesterday. We hear plenty of the voices of expediency, conformity, and popular respectability. Let us hear, and lift up, the voices of nonconformity in our midst that would remind us of what is noble and just, true and enduring, in the long march of humanity across the changing arenas of our history. King helped us to believe not only in justice and civil rights, but in forbearance and nonviolence, not only in the power of the ballot box but in the power of moral force and example. We must lift up the voices of those who oppose violence and continue to believe in the possibilities of nonviolent resolution of human problems. We must lift up the voices of those who reject the maxim of might makes

right, who pursue justice, peace, and reconciliation at personal sacrifice and without concession to the prerogatives of power. In our day these are to be counted among the "seven thousand" who have not bowed their knees to Baal.

There are still other voices that need to be lifted up in our midst: The voices of those who have not succumbed to the self-indulgences of a consumer culture and an entertainment economy; the voices of those who believe that a person's life does not consist in the abundance of one's possessions, or the extent of one's capacity to exploit the resources of this planet; the voices of those who, believing that the commonwealth of God, or the commonwealth of humanity, is an inclusive fellowship of all peoples, find it unnecessary to secure their own existence at the expense or exclusion of others.

Many whose voices need to be heard are not sure that any church or religious community has a place for them. Sixteen years ago, grounded in Minneapolis while returning from my grandfather's funeral, I wandered over to the Mall of America and purchased a copy of Kathleen Norris' best-selling book, *DAKOTA: A SPIRITUAL GEOGRAPHY*. When she's not in Hawaii, Norris resides in Lemmon, South Dakota, where she and her poet-husband (who has since died) moved some thirty-plus years ago to the family farm after her Presbyterian grandmother died. She had been living as a budding writer in New York City. Her book is in many respects an effort to give voice to the people and land of Western Dakota, but it is especially an expression of her own spiritual pilgrimage, a pilgrimage that connects with many of the themes of our time.

Norris writes, with respect to her move to the Dakota of her grandmother,

. . . for a time I tried on her Presbyterian church, the way I wore her old jackets and used her furniture. I still enjoyed singing hymns, but found that church was an uneasy exercise in nostalgia, and soon stopped going.

When some ten years later I began going to church again because I felt I needed to, I wasn't prepared for the pain. The services felt like word bombardment--agony for a poet--and often exhausted me so much I'd have to sleep for three or more hours afterward. Doctrinal language slammed many a door in my face, and I became frustrated when I couldn't glimpse the Word behind the words. Ironically, it was the language about Jesus Christ, meant to be most inviting, that made me feel most left out. Sometimes I'd give up, deciding that I just wasn't religious. This elicited an interesting comment from a pastor friend who said, "I don't know too many people who are so serious about religion they can't even go to church" [p. 94].

Norris is nothing if not religious. Her "spiritual geography," as she calls it, is a moving account of how she understands her life and faith. She eventually became an active member of her grandmother's Presbyterian church – I don't think joining a Unitarian Universalist congregation was an option in Lemmon, South Dakota. Later, as her spiritual journey continued, she became a Benedictine oblate – someone who has made a private promise to lead a life marked by certain disciplines and spiritual practices. Norris' voice, however, speaks for many who remain outside the church – feminists and others who are bothered by much of the language of the church; well-

educated and widely experienced young and middle-aged adults still searching for a spiritual center to their lives; those who have heard a distant, different drummer that has lured them away from conventional paths of success. There are many who have not capitulated to the idols of materialist culture, yet remain outside any church, not because they are irreligious, but because they have yet to find a way to come to terms with institutional religion in any form. Their voices need to be lifted up, that we might hear and recognize in them a sign of authentic presence and blessing.

Let us lift every voice, our own and those we would neglect and those our culture would reject.
Let us lift every voice that is born out of the struggle to be faithful,
and every voice that yet hopes for a better world,
and every voice that is muted in the struggle to survive,
and every voice that is stifled due to aspirations thwarted and gifts and skills denied,
and every voice for peace and justice against exploitation and strife,
and every voice for integrity and truth amidst conformity and confusion,
and every voice that seeks an honest and authentic encounter with the Source of all Being.

The cause of the Universe does not rest in our hands alone. There are many others from whom we may receive sustaining mercies, in whom we may witness true compassion and power, and with whom we may experience and celebrate the promise of an Ultimate and healing grace.
AMEN.

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