

Lectionary 19 Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost Year B 2021
August 8, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of my favorite summaries of today's first reading about the prophet Elijah goes something like this:

There was this time in the Bible where Elijah was like, "God, I'm so mad! I want to die!" So, God said, "Here's some food. Why don't you have a nap?" So, Elijah slept, ate, and decided things weren't so bad. Never underestimate the spiritual power of a nap and a snack.

I love this summary because it reminds us exactly how relatable this story is. Elijah had been busy doing the work of a prophet, and it was quite lonely work. At one point, he claims that he is the only prophet of the Lord that's left. After he has a showdown against 450 priests of Baal and triumphs, the king's wife, Jezebel, seeks to kill him. And so, in today's story, Elijah is quite literally running for his life.

But we don't have to be running for our lives to be able to relate to this story. Sometimes, in the midst of our work, we grow tired and hungry, and maybe even a little dramatic. We know that fatigue and hunger can wreak havoc on our wellbeing. And when we find ourselves at what feels to be a breaking point, a point where we feel all alone and we feel like we just can't go on, maybe what we really need is a little bit of rest and something to eat.

The Christian community in Ephesus, the original audience of today's second reading, was seeking guidance on how to live counterculturally as Christians in the world. The writer of this letter encourages them, reminding them that they are not alone, and that they should be united in their mission and work. As Christians, they are given a long list of things to strive for. The community is encouraged to speak truth, be angry but do not sin, do not let the sun go down on your anger, give up stealing and labor honestly, let no evil talk come from your mouth, put away all bitterness, wrath, anger, and slander, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. This is a pretty tall order to fill, especially as it is summed up at the end: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us." This sounds absolutely exhausting, if not impossible to accomplish.

Instead of speaking truth and living in love, we too often find ourselves wrapped up in lies, anger, and divisions, leading us to destroy community, rather than build and strengthen it. We end up isolating ourselves, refusing to work together because of our differences, and therefore working even harder because we're duplicating someone else's work.

This is one of those things that I both love and struggle with at the Loaves and Fishes event each year. I love that there are so many churches gathered to share goods and resources with our community. By working together, we can do so much more. But I am reminded each year of some of the churches from our community that *don't* show up to help with the event—at least in part because they're afraid of working with Christians different from their own denomination. How much more could we provide for our community if these Christians were willing and able to participate as well? What would it look like if we *truly* lived as a community despite our differences? I can imagine a Loaves and Fishes event that's bigger and broader than any other in our history. But it takes gathering as an even broader community, it takes partnership, love, and trust. And because of our divisions, some in our community simply aren't able to participate in this event where we share God's abundance with those in need.

We hear in Ephesians that this is not the life to which we have been called. We have been called to unity in Christ, and to live and serve one another and all in need. We are called to build up community, and to strengthen and encourage one another in our work. And God provides an example for us in our story of Elijah.

God knew that Elijah couldn't carry on alone. So, God sent an angel as a messenger to him, who gave him food and drink, and encouraged him on his way. The angel reminded him to rest and eat, and helped to strengthen him for the journey ahead. And after Elijah's encounter with the angel, Elijah was able to carry on in the wilderness for forty days and nights with renewed strength.

You see, the reality is that we can't get by on our own. Elijah needed the help of God's messenger. We all have times in our lives when we need to rely on someone else to help us out. And God promises to send us a messenger—or perhaps a community of messengers—to help us on our journey.

When we gather in community as the body of Christ, we become God's messengers. We reach out to one another with love, support, forgiveness and hope.

"Get up and eat," we say to one another. "Otherwise the journey will be too much for you." "Let me walk with you," we say, "otherwise the journey will be too much for you." "Let me pray for you, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." God intends for us to live in community so that we can be God's messengers for one another.

And so, this is why we get this reading from Ephesians. Community is vitally important for our lives as Christians. Community is so important that it was one of Jesus' primary missions. And so, in the book of Ephesians, we receive this advice to help maintain community. This passage teaches us what it looks like to live in community: We are called to prevent our anger from turning into acts of hatred and violence. We are called to be honest in our work, and to share with those in need. We are called to speak well of each other, to use words to build people up rather than to tear them down. We are called to be kind to one another and forgive one another. And we are called to trust that God who sent his Son to be our bread, is present with us, guiding us every step of the way. It is Christ who overcomes our sinfulness and leads us to create the community that God intends for us.

Christ creates this community in the Lord's Supper. As we gather each week at the Lord's Table to receive Christ, we receive the promised bread of life that overcomes all sinfulness. With this bread, we *become* the body of Christ. We gather in communion with one another and with all the saints. God unites us in one body, one community, that journeys together and spreads the love that God has shared with us. In this meal, God builds up this body of Christ so that we can support one another in our times of need.

And as the body of Christ, we say to one another, "Get up and eat. We are here for you, and we will journey with you when life is too much to bear". Thanks be to God. Amen.