

Pentecost 3, Proper 5
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

June 5, 2016
Rev. Paul Moore

The Unlikely, Prophetic Community

Today Deacon Tom, Bryce and Sherry and a number of others of us are in Palomas. They are making an official visit to Elim Church, our sister congregation there. Elim belongs to the Assemblies of God denomination. It comes in response to their visit to us on January 31. If you remember, they were here with us at the combined service. They shared their music with us, and left us with this gift. It's small, but it represents them, and our relationship. They also joined us at our Parish Meeting.

Our contingent takes with them the gift we have prepared for them. Whereas we have a long and rich history, beginning in the last part of the 19th century, they are barely 2 years old. They are still building and equipping their worship space. We have given them money to install bathrooms and buy chairs.

Why are we doing this? We are doing this because we believe in resurrection.

The lessons today all deal with unlikely life in the midst of death. In the Old Testament lesson Elijah raises the son of the widow of Zarephath. This is the widow of the jar of oil and pot of meal, if you will recall. God had sent Elijah to the woman to sustain the prophet during 3 and a half years of drought that Elijah himself had foretold. When he calls to her and asks for water she explains her plight. She has enough for one more meal for herself and her son...but she feeds Elijah first and the supplies miraculously do not run out until the rains come. This son, then, dies. In those days there were no social security or pension plans. The children one had were one's security in time of need. Now that security is gone. The woman, herself is really as dead as her son. Through Elijah God restores the son to life and the woman to hope.

In the Epistle lesson Paul defends his role as apostle to the Gentiles. He explains how his calling is of God and not from his own human ambition. He tells how unlikely a person he was for this kind of ministry. He was a persecutor of the church of God, but now he has been given apostleship to the Gentiles. You could say that he has been raised from the life of death to the life of the life of God.

In the Gospel lesson Jesus restores a young man to life. Many scholars believe that Luke intentionally draws links between Elijah and Jesus. Luke's usage of this story parallels Elijah raising the son of the widow of Zarephath. Among other parallels, the issue of security and well-being certainly stands forth here as well. Jesus restores the man to life

and the woman to hope.

There are three things about all of these stories that bear noting. There is in them an element of the unlikely. Elijah finds hospitality with the desperately poor. Paul is converted from persecutor to preacher. A family in an insignificant little marginal town in Galilee is restored to health and wellbeing. That is to be expected, really. Resurrection is always unlikely. Resurrection does more than just restore the status quo. It transforms and transcends the status quo. Resurrection is about being surprised by the power of God.

There is an element of community. Elijah is taken into a home, a mother and her son. Paul turns from trying to destroy a community to trying to build it. Jesus restores a household in Nain to stability and peace. Resurrection always works toward building the community of those who are willing to be surprised by God.

As in all the stories of Jesus, there is something prophetic. Elijah is prophet to Israel, yet he goes to Sidon, to Zarephath where God brings life. In Israel there is death due to their unfaithfulness. In Sidon there is life. Sidon preaches to Israel by the actions of Elijah.

Paul switches camps. He was a Pharisee, yet when he meets Jesus on the road his pharisaism ceases to be about ego and about control through Torah. It becomes a life dedicated to preaching Jesus. His life among the Gentiles becomes a sermon to the Jews.

Jesus leaves Nazareth, his base of operations. Here he has said that a prophet is not without honor except in his own town and among his own people. To illustrate the truth of this Luke puts two stories back to back. Jesus heals a centurion's servant (a centurion was most likely a Gentile, and clearly a member of the occupying forces of Judea.) Jesus raises the son of a widow of a satellite village. His actions on the margins preach to those in the center.

The resurrection raises the unlikely, prophetic community.

In Palomas there is a lot of death. The cartels are in turmoil right now. There are still people who disappear in the night. Some of them are found alive, though often tortured horribly, others are not found alive, or not found at all. In this context a clergy couple is launching a new church. Angel believes God brought him to Palomas to begin this work. There are a lot safer places to start a church!

Who would have thought that an Episcopal Church and an Assemblies of God church would enter into a sister-congregation relationship? Our deacon Tom had vision—the

vision of God. He saw the unlikely, the opportunity for resurrection. Even our bishop caught the vision when I told him about it. He is completely supportive.

But there is life in Palomas. We saw it when they came to visit us. They shared their music, and we thrilled to it. They shared their faith, and we warmed to it. They shared the life of God that they have come to know at Elim Church in the land of death. In them we recognized community. With them we knew the presence of the living Lord. With them we knew the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

This relationship speaks prophetically. There is wall that separates Palomas from Columbus. It is physical, and its motives are political and sometimes emotional, separating Mexico and the United States—but it does not divide the Church of God.

The history of the two denominations is very different. We began when Christians first landed on British soil as Roman soldiers in the first century, and we got organized when Pope Gregory the Great sent Augustine of Canterbury to England in 597. We developed independently of the Continent of Europe for a thousand years. We became our own church when King Henry the VIII separated us from Rome in 1536.

The Assemblies of God got organized much more recently. In 1906 there was a charismatic revival that broke out at the Apostolic Faith Mission at 312 Azusa Street in Los Angeles, California. The movement grew extremely quickly, facing all the disorganization and chaos of explosive growth. In 1914, 300 delegates from what came to be known as Pentecostal movement gathered in Hot Springs, Arkansas to coordinate activities, establish some much-needed structure and order, and sponsor mission activities. The Assemblies of God are now the largest Pentecostal denomination in the United States and have work in 140 countries around the world. But differences of history do not divide the Church of God.

Elim Church is Spanish speaking. They live and move and have their being in an impoverished border town in a developing country. They established the church only 2 years ago. They don't even have enough chairs for their people to sit down on Sunday morning. We speak mostly English with some Spanish, and we live and move and have our being in a nation which still is one of the economic and political leaders of the world. We're 124 years old, and we have pews stored away because we don't use them. Yet even these differences do not divide the Church of God.

This relationship preaches to our often fractured and disjointed corner of the world about unity in the community of God.

C. S. Lewis in his classic, The Great Divorce describes the world of those who have died as falling into two great realms. Hell is described as a dark place where in bitterness and anger each person puts greater and greater distance between themselves and others, so that it becomes a place of ever increasing alienation and loneliness. To the degree that it separates and alienates it loses substance. Heaven, on the other hand, is a place of increasing light, unity, and community, and to the degree that community is formed it gains substance. Some people from hell sneak into heaven and find that they are so immaterial that the grass does not bend under them, but rather hurts their feet!

If death divides, resurrection unites, reconciles and joins. If death destroys, resurrection creates. If Good Friday kills God, Easter Sunday shows God to be ever and always greater than death. This is why some of us are in Mexico right now. It is because we believe in the unlikely resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the power of that resurrection to transform our community and our world.