

YOUR WORD FOR A WHOLE WORLD

Texts on Sunday, September 22, 2013

2 Kings 8; 1-6; Luke 18: 1-8

Last July, the Brookings Institution and the Public Religion Research Institute published results of a survey which aimed to go deeper with its 2,000 American interviewees than the usual labels, left and right. Not surprisingly, the survey found religious conservatives in greater numbers than progressives. But that is before age is factored in. Among the oldest Americans, about half think of themselves as religious conservatives and only one-eighth as progressives. Among adults born after 1980, however, only one sixth are conservatives, and one quarter are progressives. Robert P Jones, head of PRRI, says, "The percentage of religious conservative shrinks in each successive generation, with religious progressives outnumbering conservatives among the millennial generation." That's the generation you Riversiders keep saying you want to open this church up for. The church-wide survey said it, your commentaries at forums we have held say it, the interviews done for us by Auburn Seminary affirm it, as did the 5-year strategic plan which expired in 2010. Is it time to put your money where your mouth is?

E.J. Dionne, senior fellow at Brookings, says of the recent findings, "Religious conservatives are a known quantity [who] play an important role in our politics, but this survey shows that religious progressives are a more significant group than is usually assumed, and that there is a strong social justice constituency among religious Americans that cuts across labels." Here is an example. Fifteen percent of religious Americans rank the widening wealth gap as the nation's primary problem. But among unaffiliated religious Americans, 27% consider wealth disparity the topmost national crisis. Fully one quarter of *unaffiliated* religious Americans consider themselves progressive. Commenting on the survey, Brian McLaren, with whom I was able to study last June, says that moderate churches "may have to risk alienating traditional members if they are going to attract and keep the younger Christians who are driving these trends [and] embracing social justice causes, including same-sex marriage and issues of poverty and hunger."

Let's be plain-spoken about church identity and market niche. No church is attractive to everyone. Every church that knows what it stands for is repellent to at least half of all comers. Why, in three years, Jesus got—what?—just seventy people in his church, and they killed him for it anyway. So let's not say we can be all things to all people. We'll end up lukewarm, in the words of *Revelation*, and God will spit us out. Let us be clear about who we are. As Tom Bandy says, the question is not *whether* a church is

going to lose people by affirming their core values, but *which* people they will lose as they build a future on the vision God gives them.

Remember: fully one quarter of *unaffiliated* religious Americans consider themselves progressive. Might Riverside's time have come around again? Even though there's a broad river just west of here, in which the human population is probably zero, even so, within walking distance of this church are thousands of religiously open-minded, unaffiliated progressives who would like to know that there is a body of faithful nearby committed to seeing justice in the land; committed to living and learning multi-cultural diversity, hard as that is to do; committed to marriage equality; committed to worship together in spirit and in truth; who refuse the pretense of ideological conformity and reject the kind of dogma which stunts growth. They are out there. We are not, not yet. Are you ready to put your money and your mouth in the service of God's future?



In the story from the Elisha series we read today, everyone is ready to put their words in service of God's future. For once, no person in the story feels befuddled and blocked from acting with courage and power. Even the king, who usually stands for faithlessness, anxiety, and bad decisions, is, in a spirit of humility, ready to learn, take courage, and act justly.

Look closer. The Shunamite, you may recall, was a woman of means who once determined with her husband to set aside a whole room in their home just for Elisha, whenever he might travel through their region. Elisha's promise that she would give birth to a boy, despite her husband's great age, was fulfilled. When that boy died, Elisha restored him to life. So Elisha and the Shunamite woman have a deeply shared relationship.

Elisha now attends to her with pastoral care in a public crisis. He tells her to "rise and go and settle wherever you can, for the LORD has called for a famine" on the promised land of Israel, which will last seven years. She heeds the word of the man of God and heads west to settle in the land of the Philistines; that is, among the Palestinians. The two words are one!

The Shunamite went among the Palestinians as an undocumented alien, and lived there in safety for seven years, with rain and sun and food enough. When the famine in Israel was ended, she goes home and finds her property seized and her rights forgotten or denied. This is a story about injustice and justice. You don't need the word "social" in front of "justice." You don't need "economic" in front of "justice." Injustice *is* social. Injustice *is* economic—that is, it has to do with who decides who gets what. If you think your God cares when powerful people prevent the weak from securing what

they need, then you are what they call a progressive; and you want your church to stand for justice and to help turn the American ship from forty years of sailing into vicious oppression of the poor toward a new shore, where people can appeal to the king, and the king listens. Now that would be progress, and they would be progressives, right? This is how more and more young Americans want to see the church—looking like Jesus.

Now, the king is talking with Elisha's servant Gehazi. He is saying, "Tell me all the great things that Elisha has done." Gehazi knows them all, of course, (and so do you, for we have heard them all this summer) yet Gehazi chooses to tell one great thing above all about Elisha. He tells "how he revived the dead." That's all that's there in the Hebrew text, a few short words: how he revived the dead. Just then, behold, the Shunamite comes into the room where they are talking, and Gehazi stops *talking* about Elisha's great thing so he can present this great thing to the king. "My lord king, here they are, whom Elisha revived from the dead."

Few verses of the Bible so succinctly reveal as does verse 6 the transformation toward justice in a man of power. There is another, when that persistent widow of Jesus' parable finally prevails on the unjust judge, and he says "yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice." But here in Elisha's story, this king is at last not stuck, and not unjust. He sees the widow and the wonder of her living son. He questions her briefly. He listens to her. He trusts her account. And then immediately, he puts behind her his money and his word to right the wrongs done to her.

In all the stories of Elijah and Elisha, only here does the person at the top of power become a learner in all humility, who acts with courage and justice to perform God's will on earth. Why? The story does not hit us over the head with its answer. It is as if the story tellers yearn to call forth from us a learner's mind. Learn this. One action lies between the king's old nature and his new power; between ruinous, ignorant abuse of power and real possibility to make things otherwise. That one thing is Gehazi's telling of all the great things, the power alive in the land by the hand of Elisha, the man of God, to bring life to what is dead. This story of God's power to restore life kindles in the king a yearning to use *his* power to restore. He wants to and even needs to participate in the powers of restoration he feels in his land—yet only because he heard of it, and then saw it with his own eye.

Therefore, take the leap, O children of God. Wealthy and powerful people, say these stories, are generally jammed up by the requirements of maintaining power and success and the bottom line, and so no longer feel the faith and freedom to act justly. But if they heard all the great things that God is doing in the land, this story begs us to wonder, how might faith and

freedom descend? The current issue of the *Christian Century* carries an article by the president of the City Club of San Diego called “Unnoticed ministries.” His point is simple. Churches are terrible at telling the world all the great things they are about, and so the world makes up its stories about them. One San Diego church estimated the in-kind value of its contributions to the city at \$10,000,000—and got some notice from local politicians on that news.

What if you told all the great things that Riverside is doing? What if justice in the land hangs on your word for a whole world? And what if you stopped telling the small things Riverside does? Many say that attendance is dwindling. I have the ushers’ facts right here. Attendance is not dwindling. It is a false statement. Don’t say it. Attendance is stable, just slightly more this year than last. Giving is not dwindling. That is a useless exaggeration. Don’t say it. Through August, this year’s giving stands 1% below last year’s number. Don’t tell all small things. Tell all the great things. Try this.

Yesterday, representatives from almost fifty organizations gathered here to put an end to incarceration nation, the tragic and racist pattern by which American power and wealth wrap millions of lives in endless damages, destroying communities and forcing us all to exhaustion on a treadmill of lost time and treasure. Among those attending yesterday’s action meeting was Mr. Stephen Downs, grandson of Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick. I was so pleased to make his acquaintance, and also to gain his permission to quote for you something he said to me. Mr. Downs said, “My grandpa would be so happy to see all the great things you are doing.”

Oh, Riverside, your word is needed for a whole world. You must tell all the great things that God is doing and find also the living water to extinguish the fires of envy and anger and disappointment on your tongues. Rather, seeing with our Lord our need to pray always and not lose heart, let us, like the widow who kept coming to the judge, like Gehazi ready to tell all the great things that Elisha had done, let us trust that God will grant justice to those who cry to him day and night. Now feel therefore your God as God leans forward to listen. God waits to hear your word for a whole world.

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*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*