

10th Sunday 2016

1 Kings 17:17-24

Elijah carried the boy up the steps into the upper room. He stretched out over the boy three times and prayed urgently. The ritual action was repeated three times for the spirit to return to the boy's body. This is like the primitive version of Jesus healing the blind man. Jesus takes him aside, spits in his eyes, lays hands on him, and the man says, "I see people but they are blurry, like trees walking." When Jesus touches him again, the man sees clearly. Three actions needed; there is some symbolic truth there.

The stories show that God's power isn't like magic; it doesn't work instantly; first and second attempts fail, but finally, approaching the problem from a distant angle, there is a breakthrough. It might mean that it takes time for the wonder-worker to learn his craft. But it might mean that marvelous experiences don't happen all at once. They are like riding a bike or learning to swim. You fall off, water goes up your nose, it feels sore and unpleasant, many times. You keep trying though the result is always the same, until one day, things goes click. You sail down the street, and make it across the length of the pool. There is joy that the spirit has entered you, and your dry bones dance. Miracles are a two-way street; you can't sit there waiting for God to fix everything. You have to take the spit in your eye, let the prophet crush you with his weight, endure tedious waiting. Then amazing things happen.

Miracles pull life out of death. It just so happens that I recently gave a five-day retreat on that theme--life out of death, joy out of sorrow--to a community of Benedictine sisters. Some of you know this as I am not one to keep my worries or rewards private. Since I shared anxiety and anticipation with you, now I give the report.

I worked hard to prepare, sifted through 15 years of unorganized homily manuscripts to find material. I wanted music to go with the talks, since many important experiences are non-verbal. I wanted the sisters to enter grief and longing, experiences of death, and then be overpowered by music of joy and life. I used recordings of Bach's vocal music. He knows depths of soul most profoundly; he can uniquely make death beautiful. This was asking a lot of my audience. Some of them would rather watch the Nationals. I coaxed and coached, showed them what to listen for, physically swirled out the musical patterns (the shape of sopranos singing *bonae voluntatis* in the B-minor mass). Getting my head out of the clouds, Peter Collins had said, "How many are there, how big is the room, how many are hearing-impaired?" We chose the right sound-system speakers, so the sisters could pick out the melody from the ornamentation, hear the pin drop.

I chose teasers as session titles. Asking the important questions. Doing the beautiful thing. Finding someone to walk with. Crying into a bottle (not what you drinkers will think). Living in a mansion. (Eight in all: you have heard most of the stories.) My source was St Benedict's rule, chapter four, two tools for good works. Keep death daily before your eyes. We all know that one; what about the counterpart? Yearn for life with passionate desire. Life and death: what else is worth thinking about?

Eighteen women sat in easy chairs in a big U. I stood in front of the fireplace and taped pictures to the mantel. Women religious are more adaptable than men. In our community, we sit rigidly in straight rows, stonily listening with bowed heads, until the signal is given to leave. What a relief that can be, but the poor speaker. Women are more relaxed. All but one of my group were over seventy, with no prospect of vocations, soon moving to smaller accommodations. This hurts but they are optimistic. I admired them.

Sister Hedwich is from Germany; she never cracks a smile. She helped set up the room and tune the speakers before the first talk. Another sister asked, "How do you want to be

introduced?” “How about ‘here’s Gabriel who’s about to give his first retreat?’” Sister Hedwich snapped, “Don’t say that; they won’t give you a chance.” “Right,” I thought, “Time to get serious.” Then Sister Anthony ambled by, not waiting for an introduction. “You are cute!” she exclaimed, disregarding all prohibitions against provocative language. Since I am sixty, and she eighty-four, we skated through.

Sister Josephine is ninety and never had a headache. Like me she likes to tell her stories. Some sisters had heard them once too often. But I loved hearing about the community in 1948. “Sister, there is no conversation during dish-washing.” “Sister, we do not fan ourselves when it is warm in church.” “Mother Prioress, my mother missed my profession. Now my baby brother is to be baptized. Going would mean so much to me.” “Sister, we make no unnecessary family visits.” “What have I gotten myself into?” thought Sister Josephine. Which led right to topic B: asking the important questions.

Ultimately a spiritual retreat is not about the conferences. It is about hearing the still small voice. I heard it. From the youngest sister’s choice to remain while her peers moved to “more vibrant” groups. From an older sister living outside community to care for a family member with dementia, unaware of the astounding quality of this commitment. From a sister who had examined the source of her sarcastic tongue, and chose a different attitude. Oh, there are heroes living right next to us, if only we would open our eyes and see as an outsider does. It seems cliché to say I gained more by living with them than they did from listening to me. But a cliché can hold truth.

In our last session we listened to a duet. In Bach the bass-baritone is often the voice of Christ, and the soprano represents the soul. She resists Christ’s appeals, until he persuades her to surrender, as in a romance, showing the movement from pain to joy, death to life. The group sang for me a farewell song and gave me a bag of gifts. As if I need trinkets to remember them, though trinkets, like clichés, hold truth. I invited the sisters to share, knowing that some did their sharing outside group. One sweet voice said, “The music and your stories caused me to grieve for my parents. They died long ago, but I never allowed myself to mourn.” What could I say? What do you say when a miracle is made manifest, when the man sees clearly, or the boy starts breathing again? You smile through misty eyes and Bach’s polyphony peals through the silence of your inner ear.

Sister Hedwich never cracked a smile, saying gruffly, “It was worth listening to.”
Gabriel Myers, OSB