

“Missing the Point” based on 1 Kings 19:8-17 and Galatians 3:1-5, 21-29
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione, June 19, 2022, Shelby Presbyterian Church

Have you ever had a conversation you remember because it changed you? One of those conversations for me was about 12 years ago when I worked in politics. I was the on the phone with my boss, Darrel, a New York State Senator, and we were talking about some upcoming votes in the Legislature. I was his communications director and I had serious concerns.

You see, we knew we were in for a battle for re-election, and the upcoming votes were all hot-button issues. We were under a microscope both locally in our district, and across the state, even with some national news sources. It was my job, to manage public perceptions, as best as I could at least.

I was looking at these bills and panicking – each one was going to alienate someone, whether it was our base and the more extreme parts of it, or the swing voters, the ones we desperately needed if we were going to win a third term. I asked Darrel if it was possible to reconsider how he intended to vote, or at least, if we could manage a slight shift with an amendment which even if it’s not accepted, we have something to hang our hat on. Is there something we could use to dilute how it is perceived?

It’s not that I disagreed with his position at the time, it’s just that I didn’t think it was going to sit well with people watching us, especially some of our biggest supporters. We couldn’t afford to alienate them, not if we were going to win.

That’s when Darrel, in his wisdom, reminded me of why we were there in the first place. He told me I was missing the point. Our job, he said, was not to get re-elected. Our job was to do what was right for the people we represented. That’s it. And these words I remember verbatim, *“If doing what’s right costs us this election, then so be it.”*

He voted his conscience, and I did my job with the public. He was not re-elected and all of us lost our jobs. After the loss, that conversation stuck with me, and it played a role in my 6-month job search. You see, I was pretty good at my job, and so, after we lost, I had offers. Through a close friend, a couple of newly elected Senators reached out to me. He said the jobs were mine, if I wanted them, and he really pushed one. But after consulting with my wife, I said, “Thank you,” but I didn’t really want to work in politics. I realized that what I really enjoyed, was working for Darrel.

When I had missed the point of why were there, the one whose actual re-election was at stake, reminded me of our true calling. We were there to do what’s right to the best of our abilities, no matter what others will think.

In the chapter before today’s passage from Kings, the prophet Elijah has just walked away from a great victory. In a great show, he thought he had proved to everyone that the God of Israel was the one True God. He called down fire on a sacrifice, while Baal’s prophets failed to do the same. Yet, this did not change the King’s mind, this proof meant nothing to him. The people of Israel did not abandon Baal right then and there. Instead, the queen ordered that Elijah be

killed. The prophet stood by the Lord but felt alone there. And rather than die at the hands of the queen, he prayed that God would take him then. He believed he had failed. He just gave up.

So, the Lord sent an angel to Elijah with food and drink and told him to get up and eat. That's where our reading picks up the story: Elijah eats, and he gains his strength. What does he do with his energy? Does he go back to being a prophet? No, he runs away. He goes a 40-day journey to Mount Horeb.

And so, the Lord speaks and asks – “What are you doing here, Elijah?” Elijah recounts that has been faithfully working for the Lord, yet the Israel has not recognized this, and has fallen away. He says the prophets of the Lord have all been killed, and he knows he is next. So, the Lord tells him to get out of the cave, to stand before the Lord, who will pass by.

There are big displays of rocks crashing, earthquakes, and fires, but this is not the presence of the Lord. Yet, after all that, there is a still, small voice, literally a “calm whisper” that is left. Elijah hears it, knows it is the Lord, and covers himself up at the entrance of the cave. So, the Lord asks again, “What are you doing?” Elijah responds in the same way, as if nothing had happened. Despite apparently hearing the audible voice of God all the time, or at least receiving messages from the angels, when Elijah steps out of his hiding place and perceives the actual real presence of God, he stands there.

Elijah misses the point – the Lord heard him, listened to his valid fears and complaints. The Lord reminded Elijah that he is never alone, that the Lord is with him in the silence. Elijah rightfully brought his frustration to God, but when God responded, Elijah still couldn't fully pull himself out of that hiding place. So, the Lord just spells it out – Ok, Elijah, go back toward Damascus, and go anoint a new king in Aram and another in Israel, and then anoint another prophet to take your place. Elijah was worn out. He was ready to retire. The Lord saw it, and after meeting his needs, the Lord led Elijah to his successor, Elisha. The Lord remained with Elijah, did not condemn the prophet for missing the point, but had mercy on him.

In our final reading, Paul has found himself dealing with a church that has missed the point. Galatia was a Greco-Roman province that was a hotbed of ethnic strife. The name itself gives us a clue, because Galatians were a Celtic tribe. They were immigrants to Asia Minor, what is now modern-day Turkey. These Galatians shared ancestors with the Gauls, Britons and Irish. They were not the local Phrygian and Pamphylian peoples there. But nevertheless, they assimilated with the Greeks, and later the Romans who conquered the area. Then mix in a significant Jewish population, and the tensions likely only grew.

The Greek and later Roman model of conquest was to absorb and assimilate the conquered. If you truly were to be successful in that ancient world, you had to become Roman. The one exception that was granted, came out of a strange pre-empire alliance, in which the Roman Republic recognized Judaism, and exempted the Jews from having to perform duties to the Roman pantheon of gods. Many in the Roman military hated this arrangement, including Pontius Pilate, who went against this historic agreement and tried to put the emperor's image in the temple, but he never succeeded in this effort.

And so, this is the stage of Paul's ministry in the region of Galatia in central Asia Minor. He brings them the gospel message – that Jesus died for all people, every ethnicity. He tells them that in Christ, in the Messiah, all are beloved children of Abraham, and this is by faith, but what's more they are also heirs to God. Now, in that ancient world, this must have been truly good news. It meant that Galatian and Roman, Phrygian and Jew, all had the same standing before God and were siblings, even if not by blood, but by faith as co-heirs of life eternal and abundant in Christ.

But here's the problem: The Roman Authorities didn't understand all of this equality stuff. They never liked the special status they had to give the Jews under historic Roman law, and now these other people – the natives, the settlers, and even some Romans – are all claiming to worship the same God, but they did so without becoming Jews. They still ate like Phrygians, ate like Galatians, and ate like Romans, and they still dressed the same and the men were all still uncircumcised. But it wasn't just the Romans who had this problem. Some of those who were ethnically Jewish, thought this was fundamentally unfair.

They reasoned that if Jesus was the embodiment of the one True God of Israel, and if the ancient Israelites were told to be circumcised and to have certain food laws, then all of these converts from pagan religions should have to do the same. These works of the law were what set the people apart, they reasoned, and if they were called to be a light to all nations, they had to be holy. And so, these pagan peoples who had previously submitted to "being Roman," just went along with this and started "becoming Jewish" by circumcision and food laws.

This is why Paul seems so furious in this letter – This church is missing the point! At the same time, the people are behaving like pagans with assimilation, and they are being put under the yoke of the law that Christ fulfilled. This is literally the worst of both worlds and so again, Paul desperately wants to show them their mistake. Like Elijah, the Galatians have missed the point.

Paul tells them that it was not by the works of the law that they received the Spirit of God. No, it was by hearing and believing in what they had been told about Jesus, namely, that Jesus is the Son of God, the Lord, who is wholly one with the Father. He humbled himself to share in our humanity and was crucified. He suffered and died on that cross, giving himself for our sinfulness, but the Father raised him from the dead, to rescue us, to instill in us the Holy Spirit, making us right with God, because the Spirit empowers us to bear fruit. It empowers us to grow and change the world around us, by living like Jesus, our brother.

You see, the law was a trainer – it was like training wheels on a bike to guide us, but now that faithfulness has come, it is like we have received the gift of balance, allowing us to ride freely without the training wheels. The word translated as 'trainer,' but sometimes as disciplinarian or school master, was the word for a teacher, usually an enslaved person, who was charged with teaching the heir of a household until they were mature. This point that Paul is trying to make is that the law is good and was necessary, but in the faithfulness of Christ, we are mature enough to leave our teacher and take our place as heirs.

All of this heir language is important, because Paul is trying to show them what grace is. Jesus is the one True Son of God, fully God, but Jesus also shared in our human flesh as our brother. So, we are all 'sons of God' in Jesus, not because we are somehow now divine, and not because we are all suddenly male either. No, in that world, the sons were the heirs. And so now baptism, open to all genders, marks us as heirs in Christ.

You see the competing philosophies of pagan, Jewish and later Christian Gnosticism, claimed that anyone who had the secret knowledge would be remade in the afterlife, and that all would be the same – they would all male and of the right ethnic composition, depending on which ethnicity the people preaching came from. But what Paul was offering here was not the deletion of people's identity, but the completion of their identity because it is now in Christ. The Galatians – all of them regardless of identity – did not have to become Jewish to be Abraham's heirs, but in Christ were heirs to Abraham and God, and they could be so, in their diversity.

Throughout human history it has been the competition between groups of people, that has encouraged benevolence and good deeds within these groups of people. By this, I mean that survival of the most fit individual didn't work with humans. Rather, humans advanced when they worked together and built societies with groupish, rather than selfish motives. But this required unity, often within tribes and ethnic groups, In order to compete against rival tribes and ethnic groups. The most unified and cohesive groups would survive.

But Paul is telling the Galatians that in Christ, this model of cultural civilization is obliterated. The structures that societies put in place to thrive in competition among groups of people, are merely barriers to our ultimate flourishing in Christ as one people – a multi-ethnic community without regard to earthly status. In Christ our status, most importantly our status before God, is more important than what is advantageous in the world and comes before what other people think. In fact, earlier in the letter, Paul reminds them, that even Peter stopped eating with Gentiles, when some Jewish peers shamed him. But then Peter did do what was right, after Paul called him out on it.

This was not Paul bragging about standing up to the most prominent Christian of the day, but Paul showing the Galatians that what he is saying to them right now as new converts was no different than what he would, and in fact did, say to prominent leaders in the church.

Friends, we are like Elijah, missing the point, if we let our fears get the best of us. Elijah was on the right track when he lamented to God about his impending death. Yet, when the Lord demonstrated that he was not in the flashy shows of power, but present in the still small voice, the calm whisper, in the silence, Elijah misses the point. So God redirected him to meet his needs and find others to replace him, and later reminded Elijah too, that thousands were still faithful to the Lord. He was not alone. Those he judged as having left him, were still with him.

And friends, we are like the Galatians, missing the point, if we let our differences divide us. The good news of the gospel is that in Christ, all peoples find a true and lasting unity, and there is neither Jew nor Greek, no chosen people vs. a dominant empire. And you're standing before God is not based on your economic status as an enslaved worker or owner. And you are no

longer circumcised men, marked as righteous, alongside women who carry the ethnic bloodline through children. Instead, you are both marked by baptism available to all, as God's beloved children, heirs in Christ.

In Christ, our calling is to carry on, to welcome others, and do what is right, no matter what. Our calling is not to manage public perceptions and seem good, as we do evil. No, when the world tries to steer us toward what is easy, dividing us into the groups we are comfortable with, we need to be a people who welcomes others. But we do not do this to change them into our image. We welcome them to introduce them to a God in Christ who embraces them as they are and marks them with the Spirit to free them from sin and death.

Elijah was worried about the King and Queen and the people of Israel abandoning the Lord. The Galatians were worried about the Roman culture and the Jewish traditions. Paul tells them that their suffering is for nothing, if they go the easy route. I missed the point back in 2010, when I was worried about the election and Darrel reminded me, "If doing what's right costs us, then so be it."

Friends, as we go forth, remember that the path of Christ is not an easy one, but our God knows our needs just as God knew Elijah's, and Christ calls all, as Paul said. The Spirit is with us as just as the Lord was with Elijah in the still, small voice. Likewise, with this Spirit, we are called to embrace others, and lead them to Christ, not by making them fit into our culture, but by loving them like Christ, to recognize the Spirit is with them, so that we might be led together as co-heirs of God. Amen.