

“The Bread of Life on the Corner of Main and Liberty”
2 Kings 4:42-44

Today we celebrated the joining of new members to our church one through Baptism and the rest into full membership. But do they really know what they are getting into? This reminds me of a discussion among some committee members of a fictional Presbyterian church created by Charlotte Johnstone in her *Dispatches from Forebearance Presbyterian Church*. “When Grace Wisner convened Forebearance’s Membership Committee last week, the agenda concerned Rev. Hustiford’s desire to better educate new members as to how a Presbyterian church operates. “How do we make decisions here?” She asked them. “How does change come about? How do we handle congregational disagreements? In other words, what’s our corporate culture?” After a few moments of silence, Jack Brannigan said, “We meet, therefore we are.” What’s that supposed to mean?” Grace asked. “It means,” Jack said, “that Presbyterianism is a bunch of meetings interrupted once a week by a worship service. It means that we like to talk. It means that two weeks ago I sat in a deacons’ meeting for three hours while my fellow Presbyterians tried to figure out a way to tell Curly Rumbaugh that our ‘corporate culture’ wasn’t going to allow him to wear his red plaid golf pants when he ushers on Sunday mornings any longer.... Presbyterian hell is a tie vote in a committee with a chairperson who is incapable of moving the agenda without dithering around until everyone lapses into a coma. Listen, If Moses had tried to lead Presbyterians through the wilderness, we would have tabled the motion for a year while we conducted feasibility studies on feeding logistics, shelter needs, alternative modes of transportation for nonwalkers, child care, long-term financing, continuing education, clothing requirements and provisions for liquid intake.”

So, is that the promise we have for our new members? Meetings and getting things done decently and in order is part of our heritage. Yet I believe there was a greater vision that brought 12 people together almost two hundred years ago to establish this congregation as one of the first churches of Jesus Christ in Batavia, New York.

Our Bible story for today can give us some insights into that vision. The story takes place in the Northern Kingdom of ancient Israel in the second half of the 8th century B.C. The books of 1 and 2 Kings cover over 400 years of Israel’s history from the time of the death of King David to all the other kings that followed through the 6th century B.C. The context for our story is a time in the life of the kingdom when things were not really going well for the people. The people of Israel were feeling threatened in many ways. There were internal threats because of the bloody history of royal succession. There were external threats from neighbors like Aram (Syria) and from distant empires such as Egypt. As a result of all of these threats, the kings built massive armies, formed alliances, and paid enormous bribes. In other words, the kings of Israel relied on their own power and tactics to protect their countries. They forgot that God alone was the security of Israel. Human arrogance, Israelite or Assyrian, flies in the face of a central profession of 1&2 Kings that God plays the decisive role in human history. The kings trusted in their own schemes and rejected God, who had secured Israel all along. Interestingly, those who recognized God’s weighty role in history were the vulnerable: Widows and orphans, hungry prophets, and a king on his deathbed.

Elisha was a prophet at the time. He was called by God to help people who had been neglected by their leaders. Elisha belonged to the “company of prophets” – those who practiced the vocation of speaking God’s word to the nation and its ruler. Somehow people forgot about what was important in life. They needed to be reminded that their relationship with God and their relationships as a community were the most important things in life. The kings’ obsession with wealth and power was leading the country into greater trouble. Elisha’s acts of multiplying the bread, the oil and the healing and resurrection stories all serve to demonstrate that the one who performs them does so by the power of God, they are not performed merely for their awe-

inspiring effects. They were about getting the message across. Yet, Elisha as the man of God also acted to address the mundane, personal needs of people living life day to day, especially the poor and oppressed in society.

When Elisha was given the gift of bread which was a typical gift to be given to a prophet, he didn't keep it to himself. He shared it with those who were with him. The response of the servant was "how I can set this before a hundred people?" The servant did not see the possibility for a miracle. This was after Elisha had been involved in several miracles before. Just before this event, there was a famine in the land and the prophets were gathered together and they cooked a big pot of stew that became poisonous but Elisha was able to purify it with using some flour. Here we have the servant doubting that these men could have enough to eat if Elisha started by sharing the gift that he received of 20 loaves of bread. We are not told how the 100 people found enough to eat, because that is not the crux of the story. The heart of this miracle is our dependence on God and the community of sharing and love instead of greed, power and security. The bread they shared is the bread of trusting God's provisions, love and care through communities of peace, abundance and sharing.

The story of Elisha and how he called the people of Israel to rely on God for their security, health, and even their food, is at the heart of the vision of the Church of Jesus Christ. The church is not just another group of nice people in our lives that become our friends. The church is the prophetic community of God that is shaped by the power of the Holy Spirit and inspired through the reading and interpretation of the Bible to see reality through the eyes of God. Through our friendship with Christ and our relationships in the community of faith, our whole vision is altered. When the church is at its best, when we are truly formed by the Holy Spirit, we will each be challenged to always seek peace and justice through God's love and care.

For example, today's story about Elisha challenges us to see that all of our configurations of power, tended with such care and at such cost, cannot save us and that human power is a brittle illusion. The call is for us to trust in the mysterious presence of God, not in human power in all its expressions: political, economic, judicial and so forth. This is a call to a life that finds strength in letting go of control, in prayer and prophecy. The word prophet in Hebrew means "One who calls or announces" or one who is called.' They are not fortune-tellers. They don't see into the future in a magical way. Prophets were inspired speakers who interpreted current events through the eyes of faith. Prophecy was not about foretelling. It was about forth-telling or application of God's word to contemporary circumstances.

The church can play the role of the prophet in our lives helping us see our current events and lives through the eyes of faith. This could be uncomfortable at times for us when we are challenged about things in our lives or our country that feel normal or have become accepted in our society such as anger, revenge, greed, materialism, exclusivity, violence, war, and so on. This was certainly the case for the confessing church movement in Nazi Germany when a small segment of the German church felt the challenge of the Spirit to stand up for their faith in Jesus Christ against the destructive power of Hitler.

Our world is much like the world of Elisha, the prophet. It is a tough place with all kinds of threats that bring up our fears and basic instincts for survival. Our church right here on the corner of Main and Liberty is a place of hope and challenge where we can hear the voice of God calling us to live lives of love, openness, inclusivity, peace, generosity and abundance even in the face of our worst fears.

Today, Beth Stich is going to share with us about being involved in the life of First Presbyterian Church to make it the prophetic community of God's love here in Batavia. Beth: When I was first asked to speak this morning on Stewardship and particularly about serving on committees in the church, I had to laugh. Roula's description from the Forbearance Presbyterian Church is so true! I am reminded of the old joke, how many Presbyterians does it

take to change a light bulb? The answer is something like, six, because they have to form a committee first!

Over the past 3 weeks, we have heard from three members of the congregation about their life-changing experiences. Ron Hallman spoke about his time in El Salvador while visiting his daughter Heidi who was in the Peace Corps; Kay Fetterly spoke about her trips to New Orleans; and Glenn Adams spoke about his experiences working at Crossroads House. All three told us, that while they began with the intention of serving others, what they received from the experience, the transformation in their lives, was by far the greater gift. That is how God works. And I think that you don't need to travel the world to find those transformational experiences, they can and do happen right here.

Gary and I joined this church in 1995. We moved to Batavia from Pennsylvania in 1991, two weeks after our oldest son Andrew was born. We attended a Lutheran Church there and I grew up in the Episcopal Church in Connecticut. We didn't know much about being Presbyterian. What we did know was that this was a warm, friendly congregation with a good pastor. This was and is a church that values children – that was important to us as our boys were then 3 and 1.

Within the next year, I was asked to serve on Session and for the first time in my life, I can honestly say I felt God nudge me and say, "Go on, take a chance". So, stepping out of my comfort zone, I said yes. Not long after going on Session, John Dunham asked me to chair the Music and Worship Committee. You know what happens when the pastor asks you to do something - I said yes!

I served on Session for six years. To say the experience was life-changing is an understatement. I'll be honest, it was not always easy. Each new situation challenged us to trust God and each other, to look beyond our individual ideas or needs for the good of the church as a whole.

I am still on the Worship Planning Committee. On this committee and on Session, in Bible studies and adult Sunday School, by teaching Confirmation Class, and serving on the Missions and Fellowship Committees, I have had the privilege of working with people in this congregation who have taught me, challenged me, encouraged me, and supported me on my faith journey.

For the past three years, on the Missions Committee, I have watched the Spirit of God at work in this congregation. Together we see a new vision for the world and our place in it. We have a new understanding, a new awareness, of some of the issues facing our brothers and sisters in need here in this country and around the world. I have witnessed this congregation time and time again, step forward in faith to help others. Truly transformational.

This morning in your bulletin is a list of the committees of this church. I challenge you to look at this list and see where you fit in. I love this quote from Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian pastor, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Whether you are a new member or a fifty-year member, there is a place for you. Committees are always open for you to join. Maybe all this is a little out of your comfort zone, or you think you don't have the time or you already served on committees years ago. But I encourage you to take the chance, be open to the possibility of transformation.

Roula: 200 years on the corner of Main and Liberty! The programs have changed. The pastors have changed. The city has changed. But one thing is the same: The church is still the prophetic community of Christ where relationships transform and challenge our lives.