



Rob Voyle, head of the Clergy Leadership Institute, tells a story he heard while serving as an interim priest in Saskatchewan. He said it was so flat in this Big Sky country that if your dog ran away you could watch it for two days. In working with that parish, he heard stories that came down from Pioneer Days that inform the values of that parish. Because I could not survive the brutal winters without caring for you and you for me, a close sense of community arose. Parish members helped each other, including the sharing of seed grain in the spring when it was time to plant.

Out of this pioneer experience of caring for one another came the Canadian Health System. Community- caring for one another- core values that inform to this day how they live. Looking at the synopsis of responses to the Mutual Ministry Review we see similar values. A desire to care for one another. A desire to be a place of community. A desire to share the love of God with one another and with those in need through outreach such as FISH and summer lunches.

We have moved, in Rob Voyle's phrase from "funky brain" to "positive brain." We have moved into a place where the daily ratio of positive to negative emotional events is above 3:1. When our daily ratio of positive to negative emotional events is above 3:1, we are in a place where our brains- and thus our actions- become expansive, creative, resilient and our intuition is more likely correct than not. We can think outside the box. We can trust. We can be creative.

Elijah, in the lesson from First Kings gets pretty creative. He recognizes that the people of Israel are sitting on the fence about who God is and their relationship with God. "How long will you go limping with two different options? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him. The people did not answer." The people couldn't commit. And so they limped along. Or, as the text reads in the Jewish Bible: the people hopped.

They were constrained from standing upright and facing forward. The people were stuck in funky brain. So, Elijah gets creative.

An altar is prepared, the sacrifice laid, the call made to Baal. No answer. No fire. More limping – or hopping if you prefer. Oh, says Elijah: Baal must be meditating or has wandered away or is on a journey or asleep. No answer from God despite all the limping and hopping and cutting themselves until the blood flows.

Ok, says Elijah, you've had your turn followers of Baal. Now, let's try this: and Elijah builds an altar of 12 stones so that there is remembrance among those present of the twelve tribes of Israel- the chosen people of God- and he digs a trench around that altar and he lays the sacrifice upon the altar- and then he causes water to be poured out over the altar, over the sacrifice, filling up the trench. And this was precious water as Israel was in the third year of a drought.

Not just a little bit of water, but a lot of water.

And then Elijah calls out to God to bring fire down to earth. And fire comes and consumes the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the dust- and the water. The fire is not put out by the water. And when the people saw it, they turned back to God. They sang a new song and proclaimed the good news of God's salvation. They ascribed to the Lord the honor due God's name. The people of Israel were once again re-membered as people of God- as community.

Paul, too, faces a group that seems to have forgotten what brought them together. It appears that there was another gospel: one that seems to have been predicated upon human approval of their actions rather than acting in ways consistent with the good news of God in Christ. Paul thunders at them "Am I now seeking human approval or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ."

I imagine all of us, being human, have people that we want to please. But why do we want to please them? Do we want to please them even if it means doing so requires that we contradict our values? Do we seek to please them even if it means acting contrary to love of neighbor or love of God?

In the Gospel reading we learn about a community that welcomes gifts from one not of their own- the Centurion, a Roman soldier, the enemy. And that community, in appreciation for the gift, goes to Jesus at the request of the Centurion, to plead with Jesus for healing for the servant of the Centurion. We help one another- even those that are not under our roof. We turn to God for assistance when our efforts are unavailing, understanding that our efforts are only possible through faith in God as the source of life and light. In God we move and have our being. All things are possible through God. Limping and hopping, straddling the fence won't get the job done.

Limping and hopping and straddling the fence may mean someone dies in the winter when I refuse to share my wood with my neighbor who is no longer able to cut sufficient wood to burn during the coldest times – or when I refuse to share some of my seed grain when it's time to plant in the spring.

One of the new mental illnesses in the DSM-V: the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Illness, version five- is hoarding. According to the DSM-V: "There is now adequate evidence to confirm the "diagnostic validity" of hoarding, which is characterized by "persistent difficulty discarding or parting with possessions due to a perceived need to save the items and distress associated with discarding them." My fear is that God does not provide and so I must take steps to protect myself, even at the expense of my own and others well-being. Limping and hopping and straddling the fence- or learning to lean on and trust that God has my well-being in hand.

Israel was in the third year of a literal drought at the time of the Elijah and Baal dueling altars. It was also a metaphorical drought according to Carolyn Sharp. It was a time when they – and we – “are thirsty for a God whose word can once again water the earth and bring forth fruitfulness in believers”.¹ God makes a way out of no way.

The stones cast down are raised up into a new altar. Even water can't put out that fire. God makes a way out of no way. In a time when cultural and religious sensibilities would separate the observant Jewish community from the Roman Centurion, the elders were willing to cross the cultural and political divide to assist the one who had built their synagogue.

They found a way to be community to each other – each had a need the other could fill. They were willing to look for unexpected opportunities and ways of filling those needs. They learned from each other. They valued the gifts of each other. They helped each other.

Jesus heals the Centurion's slave – one who was valued by the Centurion- despite Jesus and the Centurion or the slave- never setting eyes on each other. And Jesus is amazed at the Centurion. An outsider who built a place of worship for another faith. As we might say in our political discourse today: the Centurion crossed the aisle to accomplish something of value to the other side. He had nothing to gain.

He was and would remain one of the hated occupying force. But he saw a need that he was able to fill, and he helped heal the Jewish community by providing a place for them to worship –never mind that it was not his faith tradition that would worship in that place.

The Centurion recognized, I think that we do not practice our faith in isolation. Our faith flourishes in community. Our faith is lived out in community and that community often includes others in different traditions and with different understandings of God.

In considering the responses to the Mutual Ministry Review, I was encouraged to read that we need a year round approach to stewardship and for more clarity around outreach. One person noted that it can be hard for a newcomer to enter into outreach programs- sometimes, according to this person, people seem territorial and not open to newcomers.

Would we welcome the Centurion if he were here today and offered to build us a new church? Or would we turn him away because he isn't one of us- one of the in-group or he doesn't believe quite like we do?

As we continue on this year, think about what you love to do – and how what you love to do might evidence itself in our stewardship and our outreach. *What do we have to invite people to?* What would happen if we stopped doing what we *should* and started doing more of what we love?

In a few days, we have the opportunity to volunteer our time at the Cathedral Strawberry Festival. Why would you want to spend several hours scooping ice cream or plopping strawberries on a shortcake biscuit? Why would you want to spend an hour traveling each day on what might turn out to be a hot and sticky day surrounded by hoards of people?

¹ Carolyn Sharp in Feasting on the Word, Year C, volume 3 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 210),78.

The answers will probably differ a bit for each person who goes. But I bet some of the answers will be similar: building of community, giving of time in exchange for funds that will go to help the Mary Ludwig Free Clinic that will provide health care services to those among us who don't have health insurance, and maybe a bit of fun and some laughter even with sore muscles at the end of the day. You care for me and I care for you. And God walks between us holding on to each of our hands.

Christianity flourishes, Rob Voyle says, when we realize that those early disciples didn't sit in a room anonymously. Christianity flourishes when we tell each other our stories, when we work together on common goals and build community that show that Jesus Christ has changed our lives. Jesus did not come to bring more death. Jesus came to bring life and to bring it abundantly.

You care for me and I care for you because we both believe that there is more life possible when we get off the fence- when we stop limping or hopping- and proclaim that, to paraphrase Joan Chittister: the way we respond to things makes us holy. When we accept that we are holy people beloved of God, then nothing is for nothing in our lives. And as the Bishop likes to say as the bread and wine are offered to us: Holy gifts for holy people. Stop limping. Stop hopping. Get off the fence and know that God is. And it is good.