

In the Hallway

November 28, In the Year of Our LORD, 2006

Presbytery of Genesee Valley

Batavia Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Ralph S. English

I Kings 19:1-15 and Mark 14:66-72

The last time I stood before this august group with the privilege of delivering a sermon, I was Pastor of the Federated Church in Warsaw. As a clergyman ordained by and with standing in the United Church of Christ, I was a “sort-of” member of this Presbytery. Now, under the Formula of Agreement among our four reformed denominations, I am, as Pastor of Gates Presbyterian Church, a “closer-but-still-not-quite-there” member of the Presbytery of Genesee Valley.

The last time I stood before you, I spoke of my father, born and bred a Congregationalist who would, whenever my parents visited Warsaw, take my wrist to feel my pulse – to make sure I had not become “too Presbyterian.” His primary objection was to a system that allowed clergy to moderate meetings, something no “good Congregationalist” could stomach. To his mantra “clergy can have the pulpit, lay people need to chair and lead everything else,” I would say, “But Dad, I am your son.” He would frown and say, “Like I said, *lay* people need to”

When I became Pastor of the church in Gates, I expected my father to object. Instead, he commented on how the congregational polity is flawed, that the more connectional polity of Presbyterians offered a solution to a seemingly freewheeling, no-accountability-to-anyone style common to the churches and associations of the United Church of Christ.

My father died last year, but I am reminded of him often, and of late that occurs whenever I think of *our* church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). If he were here today to take *our* pulse, what would he think? Are *we* still Presbyterian? Or, in a retreat from much of what we hold dear in our polity, are there some of us who yearn to be more congregational – and in decisions made at General Assembly this past summer, by giving Presbyteries some leeway on some crucial issues in our life as a church, have we not, in essence, become less connectional than we once were?

As we try to work out who we are as members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) – and work out how we are going to live as one church despite obvious divisive issues, I find it hard to believe that anyone knows how all of this is going to turn out. Ten years from now, will we still be one denomination? Will we in the Genesee Valley be one Presbytery? What kind of crucial issues of faith and polity will drive us in our struggle to be part of Christ’s family, the church?

Add to that mix of questions how we as a Presbytery are still in transition towards naming and installing new leadership and working through new patterns of our life together as a Presbytery, and it seems as though we have closed some doors behind us and that the doors ahead are not yet open. On top of all of that, perhaps there are several doors ahead of us from which to choose – that we are, today, “in the hallway” between the past and the future – not just because two days ago was Christ the King Sunday and next Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent putting us in that week between the official end of one church year and the official start of another – and not just because we are between the time of Jesus of two thousand years ago and the return of Christ at

some future date – and not just because our church is in flux – and not just because we seem to always be, as The Rev. Susan Hartley just said in our opening prayer, waiting, ever waiting.

Is it not tiring sometimes to be “in the hallway?” Add to all of that our desire to complete something, to be finished with something, anything, and how we become frustrated that we ever and always “in process,” never “there.” We recall Bart and Lisa Simpson screaming at Homer from the back seat, “Are we there yet, are we there yet, are we there yet,” And to Homer’s raging “no” we want to add a “when are we going to be *there*, [wherever “there” is] ... and when are we going to get out of the hallway?

So here we are, in the hallways of our life as churches, as our beloved denomination, and often, as persons who as sisters and brothers of faith are trying valiantly to find and embrace Christ’s ways of peace, grace, hope, reconciliation and love. In the hallway – between assignments, between seasons of the church year, in our struggles as congregations to find the right staffing as confined by constraints of budgets, in our search for unity and purity with brothers and sisters in faith, on our way to wherever we are headed – wondering where and how lay the answers and wondering aloud, as in my mantra of a few years ago when my life was in flux whether what is true is that “God only knows and She’s not telling.”

Although I have, from the beginning of my ministry, stuck to the lectionary 99% of the time, I took advantage of today falling between Christ the King and the First Sunday of Advent to choose passages of Scripture that spoke to this idea of “being between times” and “in the hallway.” So this afternoon we heard two “in the hallway” passages. In the first one, we are reminded of Elijah’s flight from Jezebel. On the heels of his marvelous success in the contest between Elijah and the Priests of Baal, Elijah went into hiding. Deep down, Elijah knew his work on behalf of God was not complete, but here he was “between assignments,” “in the hallway” between his spiritual battles with the Priests of Baal and the start of his work as Elisha’s tutor. The message to Elijah, as he sat in the wilderness – was three fold:

- First, God was still present. As we sang in the last stanza of our hymn, while God sometimes speaks in earthquake, wind and fire, just as often, God speaks in the still small voice of calm that comes after divine silence.
- Second, God challenges us in the hallways of our life. Just because we are in the “between times” does not mean that our Creating, Redeeming and Empowering God is going to allow us to sit back and wait.
- Third, there is work to do – in the hallways of our life, beyond the doors we have closed behind us and in front of the doors that lie ahead.

The reading from the Gospels is a bit more problematic. After Jesus’ arrest, it was finally clear to Peter that all Jesus had predicted was about to really take place and now with Jesus arrested if not in irons, Peter was caught betwixt and between. He was, in essence, in the hallway between the three years he was first among equals to when he would become the one who would stand up before Pentecost and get the disciples going, first to name a successor to Judas and then to make sure they were all in Jerusalem for that Day of Pentecost. Here was Peter, in the courtyard – and although we can’t help but concentrate on Peter’s three denials, are we not aware, as was Elijah nearly a thousand years earlier, that God was present, God found a way to challenge Peter to be a faithful follower of this Jesus, and that there was still much work to do. We take solace in the grace of God through Christ that forgave Peter – and who forgives us – when we falter, when our

words and deeds deny the Christ. In Peter's case, it was the crowing of the cock that reminded him of Jesus' words and how God was present even in that "hallway moment" in a courtyard.

What about us? When our ministry – be it as ruling elders or as those called to teach and minister in word and sacrament – when our ministry becomes bereft of joy, when budget constraints get in the way of the ministry and mission we feel called to accomplish, when fear and impatience become the order of the day and we try to retreat to some wilderness and then to a cave as did Elijah and say to God "I have had enough!," ... will we remember, not just in our heads but in the depths of our souls, that God is still present, God will still find us, God will still search us out in the hallways of our lives, will challenge us and remind us of the works of reconciliation and peace and faith to which we are called? In some form, earthquake, wind, fire, or in a still small voice, we will hear God ask "What are you doing here?" If we answer, as did Elijah, that we "would be zealous for the LORD," we will then hear the command of our God to "Go!" As Elijah tried to flee and Peter tried to deny, God did not give up on them. The same Creating, Redeeming and Empowering God does not give up on us – not when we try to flee into hiding into the corners of our own little worlds or when our behavior is less than gracious and hope filled and our acts deny the Christ. The bottom line is whether we choose to continue to embrace a polity that has held us in such good stead all these many years or whether we continue to stand in the hallway between all of the alreadies and not yet's of our lives, God is present, God has set challenges before us, and there is much work to do.

Praise be the God who begat the Only Child Who in turn ushered in the age of the Holy Spirit – the ultimate hallway of all time as we await the final indwelling of God's Kingdom which is yet to come!

Amen!