

**“Too Much”**  
**I Kings 9:4-8, Ephesians 4:25-5:2**  
**August 12, 2018**  
**The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings**

Sometimes we think to ourselves, “this is too much, it’s not worth it. It’s not worth the trouble.” I think all the time I was growing up, I couldn’t wait to be old enough to play football. I mean real football, for a high school or at least a junior high. In Colorado, kids started playing football in eighth grade, and I couldn’t wait. But then my family moved from Boulder, Colorado to Santa Barbara, California for my eighth grade year. But that’s ok. California is like a football Mecca, there wouldn’t be any problem playing for my new junior high school. So the first day of school that fall, they announced that there was football practice after school. Great! I was going to be there. So after school I went out behind the gym with the other guys who wanted to play football. The coach was out there putting in lines and leading us through warm ups and such. Then he had us all sit down in a group and told us that at this level there were a couple of things that were different from when we got to high school. First, they didn’t have any uniforms or helmets, so we would be playing flag football, not tackle. And then he said that there wasn’t really a schedule to play any of the other schools, that we would play if we got some invitations, which he was still working on. And then he looked directly at me, and said that those of us with long hair would have to have it cut so it was above the ears and off the collar. That’s when my fourteen-year-old self with shoulder length hair said to myself, “This is too much. It’s not worth the trouble.” And so I walked away. I didn’t play football that year.

Sometimes I think Elijah must have felt that way. He just wanted to walk away. This was too much. The passage we read today from the Book of the Kings takes place after Elijah’s great victory. Elijah was a prophet called by God, perhaps the greatest prophet Israel had ever known. But Elijah had an enemy who happened to be the queen of Israel, Jezebel. Jezebel had married the king of Israel, Ahab, but she herself wasn’t from Israel and she did not worship God, she worshiped a God named Baal and she wanted the Israelites to worship Baal like she did. This, of course, set up a conflict with God’s

prophet, Elijah. So a great contest was set up between Elijah and the prophets of Baal up on Mt.

Carmel. Jezebel brought up 400 prophets of Baal. The contest was to see which God would set fire to the sacrifice of his prophets without the prophets starting the fire themselves. The prophets of Baal went first early in the morning and they danced around the altar until their feet were sore. They made themselves hoarse shouting instructions and encouragement to the sky. They jabbed themselves with knives thinking that the sight of blood would start things moving, but it never did.

Elijah, of course had to get in a little trash talk of his own. Maybe Baal is on vacation. Maybe he's asleep and you should yell louder to wake him up. The prophets of Baal whipped themselves into greater and greater frenzies, but by mid-afternoon nothing had happened, still no sign from fire from above. Then it was Elijah's turn to show what God could do.

First Elijah had a trench dug around the altar and filled it with water. Then he got some volunteers to get some buckets of water and to douse the altar itself until it was soaked. Then he had them do it again. And then a third time so everything was soaked including Elijah himself. Then he gave God the word and jumped back. Lightning flashed, all the water fizzled away, nothing was left of the altar except smoking embers.<sup>1</sup> Obviously Elijah was the big winner, but now Jezebel was an even greater enemy than before. And so instead of celebrating a great victory, Elijah had to flee for his life. So he ran away from his home and his country as far as Beersheba in the south at the very edge of the desert. Then he journeyed on into the desert until he could travel no more and he sat down under the only tree in sight, a solitary broom tree. And that's where he said, It's too much. It's not worth it. God, I've done everything you asked. I've worked hard for you and I seem to get nothing but trouble. I just want to die. If the queen's soldiers catch me, they're going to kill me anyway. It's just too much. You ask too much God, too much.

Does he? Does God ask too much of us? Just read the passage from Ephesians. It's a great passage, but it's crazy. It's too much. Be imitators of God. Yeah, right. Put away all bitterness. Sure, that'll

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<sup>1</sup> Buechner, Frederick. *Peculiar Treasures*. pp. 28-9.

happen. Been on Twitter lately? Let no evil talk come from you. Fat chance of that. Each admonishment seems more unrealistic, unlikely and implausible than the last. Have you watched the news this week? Have you listened to talk radio? Have you been on Facebook, especially before the primary elections on Tuesday? Everyone had such nice things to say about each other. You may not even have had to do that. How many meetings we go to, how many gatherings of family and friends are we attending when we hear someone being torn down, someone who's not even there being talked of in disparaging terms? Sometimes those words might even come out of our mouths. Ephesians says "let no evil talk come out of your mouth." But the Greek translation is more closely "rotten words." Don't let any rotten words come out. You know those words that taste rotten and bitter even as they come out of your mouth, and that little voice somewhere that says you shouldn't be saying this. But instead, we're supposed to be imitators of God, and forgive each other everything. That's too much. God asks too much. I can forgive somethings, but there are some that are just beyond me to forgive, I guess I'm not good enough person, but I can't do it. It's too much. But Ephesians insists it's not too much. It insists that we are members of the same body, and therefore we have a responsibility toward one another. And that applies as much to the way we speak to and about one another as to any other facet of life. Preacher and scholar Alan Brehm says, "From this perspective Ephesians says that our words should convey "truth" and "grace" to each other. By "truth," I don't think it means a theoretical approach—it's not about a courtroom inquiry, or academic research, or philosophical contemplation. Rather "speaking truth is a practical matter, as the prophet Zechariah puts it: "Speak the truth to one another. In the courts give real justice - the kind that brings peace. Do not plan ways of harming one another. Do not give false testimony under oath. I hate lying, injustice, and violence" (Zech. 8:16-17 *TEV*). From this perspective, "speaking truth" is a way of fulfilling our commitment to relate to one another in ways that promote peace and justice. When that is the case our words "convey grace", they "become a vehicle and demonstration of the very grace of God."<sup>2</sup>

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2 Brehm, Alan. *The Waking Dreamer*. August 11, 2009.



How can we do that? How can we speak that way? How can our words convey grace? Practice ---on one another. That's what we're here for. That's what Christ calls us to do. To act differently than the world around us. We are called to be witnesses. To go to the ends of the earth, all the world, baptizing. To love God and neighbor. To tend and feed. To live a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called. Not just to read and long for the life outlined in Ephesians, but to prayerfully, humbly, haltingly practice it every single day.

Imagine if before we fired off that comment or posted that pithy, clever post or took out our frustration on whoever happens to be in front of us, especially at that church gathering or in coffee hour or the committee meeting, we asked ourselves: Does this build up or does it tear down? Is this kind? Am I speaking the truth in love? How does this act or word imitate God and show the love of Christ Jesus? This is no greeting card or bumper sticker. This is radical. Such practices require discipline, prayer, the ability to confess, repent and keep trying. All these acts point away from ourselves and toward God. They demand that our focus be less inward and more outward, less skeptical and more hopeful, less fearful and more merciful, less self-righteous and more aware of our need for the grace of God, less sure of our own abilities, insight and wisdom and more open to the Spirit and God's teaching. Does that feel like it's too much? It's not too much if we practice.

Imagine. No, don't imagine. Start imitating God and loving as Christ loved us. Every. Single. Day. Trust that others will be drawn to us and through us, to the One we follow. No utopian vision, but the actual Body of Christ, the church.<sup>3</sup>

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3 Duffield, Jill. Reflections on the Lectionary. August 12, 2018