

Sermon for Proper 8, Year C  
St John's, Gloucester  
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Elijah was a great prophet. According to Jewish thought, he was the greatest prophet after Moses. He stood up to Ahab and Jezebel, the wicked king and queen of Israel, and orchestrated the battle of the gods, where Baal and the Lord God had to prove who was really a god by burning up a sacrificed bull. (Spoiler alert—the Lord God won.) Remember the Transfiguration, when Jesus goes up a mountain with Peter, James and John and turns bright white? Who else appears there? Moses and Elijah!

So Elijah is the bomb. When he is coming to the end of his life, he somehow knows that he is going to leave in a spectacular way—he is not going to die like normal people. He is going to be taken up to heaven in a whirlwind. And eventually that happens. Elisha, the young prophet, sees this amazing sight—Elijah being separated from Elisha by a flaming chariot and flaming horses and then ascending to heaven in a whirlwind. Wow!

But the story is less about the pyrotechnics and more about the two men. The Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis points out that the writer of the story only talks about the spectacle in passing. Rather, the focus on the story is on the relationship between Elijah, the old and seasoned prophet, and Elisha, the young prophet who was Elijah's apprentice.

Elijah is trying very hard to get away from Elisha so he can be taken away. As they travel, he keeps telling him—"You stay here while I go on." But Elisha is having none of it. He knows what is coming and he doesn't want it. He clings to Elijah, "As the Lord lives and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." This happens several times. Finally, Elijah turns to his student and asks, "Tell me what I can do for you before I am taken away from you." And Elisha asks for a double share of Elijah's spirit—twice as much of the Spirit that can guide him and make him a prophet like Elijah. It may not be a request grounded in egotism as much as in belief that he, Elisha, isn't up to the task of being a prophet, so needs extra help to be one. Elijah says, "Hmm, that's a big ask. If you see me being taken up, then your wish is granted; if not, then not."

And then comes the spectacular part with the fiery chariot and horses and horsemen and Elijah carried up away from Elisha. Elisha sees it all, and then picks up Elijah's mantle and performs the same miracle of parting the water that Elijah had done.

So the story is on this interplay between the two men, one young, one old. It is a story about friendship, but not just any kind of friendship, about "holy friendship." Friends are such an important part of life—they are people who walk with us, give us comfort and support and advice, they stay at our sides through thick and thin. But Gregory Jones talks about **holy friends** as people who do all that and more. Holy friends have God at the center of their life together. They not only care about each other and accompany each other through life, they seek God to guide their lives and work through their lives.

Who can be a holy friend? It could be a spiritual director whom you see every month or two and share your life with. It could be someone you know through church, someone you have gotten to know and after a while you also share your spiritual journey with. Someone you can freely ask to pray for you or someone you pray for. It could be someone you meet in a secular circle, but come to know as a person of faith, and start building a deeper relationship to, one based on your mutual love of God. It could be a person of the same gender or different, older or younger, same background or different. What matters is your commitment to God and your sense that this other person and you have deep respect and growing love for each other. In the Bible there are many examples of holy friendships—David and Jonathan, the disciples, Mary and Elizabeth, Paul and Luke.

What do holy friends do? I would say, you need to be able to talk about things of the spirit—to share your struggles to believe and grow in faith, to share joys and concerns, to ask for guidance and insight from the other. It's important to share prayer. That's not something that we Episcopalians feel confident about, for the most part. But it doesn't have to be elaborate or polished. Just holding a friend in your mind and asking God to guide or heal or be present to her is prayer. Doing that daily or weekly for a person is a great gift, and having another pray for you regularly is also a great gift.

Gregory Jones further says, "Holy friends challenge the sins we have come to love, affirm the gifts we are afraid to claim and help us dream dreams we otherwise would not dream." ("Discovering hope through holy friendships," Faith and Leadership, June 18, 2012, <https://www.faithandleadership.com/l-gregory-jones-discovering-hope-through-holy-friendships>). "Holy friends challenge the sins we have come to love, affirm the gifts we are afraid to claim and help us dream dreams we otherwise would not dream."

Holy friends don't just let us stay complacent when we are engaged in unhealthy behaviors or relationships—things that we love or believe are indispensable to us. Maybe we love to shop and get clothes or things that we don't need or can't afford. Maybe it is working so hard that you neglect your health or family, but justify it as "doing God's work." I know some priests AND some lay people who have fallen into that on. Maybe you are so attached to your life as it is, that you refuse to plan for the future, even though the reality is that you or your spouse will probably get to the point that you won't be able to stay in your home. Holy friends gently point out our faults and don't let us off the hook. They remind us that God promises to lead us into life, but that we have to let go of things that become addictions or idols in our lives.

But holy friends also affirm gifts that we may not see or may be afraid to accept. They see deeply into us—just as they don't let us get stuck in sin or addiction, they also don't let us ignore the great gifts God has given us. They identify what is hidden beneath the surface and call these gifts to us so that you can use them for good.

And they listen to and encourage our dreams. We have lots of dreams when we are young, and it's so important to encourage young people, like Elijah did to Elisha—to help him grow and identify his gifts and find his dreams. But even when we are older, we probably have unrealized

dreams. It's SO important as we age to have holy friends who will stand by us and let us unearth those dreams, let them come to fruition. If God plants these dreams in us and these gifts in us, then God can make them happen. We need friends who can encourage us and walk with us through this process.

A number of years ago, I was a very part-time priest at St. John's church in Worcester. It was a small church with a dedicated bunch of families. I had the opportunity to become a holy friend to one woman in particular, named Merry. At the time, she was about 60. She was a deeply committed Christian and lively person. But she was weighed down by her long-time marriage to her husband who was an alcoholic. She didn't want to stay in the relationship, but she enjoyed her large home on many acres of land, and enjoyed having her family around her. She didn't want to disrupt that. She insisted on counseling, she tried different things. Those of us who were her holy friends gently pointed out that the relationship was not life-giving for her, even though it was comfortable on some levels. We prayed with her and for her. Finally, she saw that all her efforts were not changing him or the situation. She asked for a divorce.

At the same time, a dream started forming inside of her. She wanted to create a retreat center for women, a safe place that women could come to for classes and fellowship and quiet, a place to connect deeply with God. Those of us who were her holy friends listened to her, prayed with her, helped her test out the dream. She questioned if she could do it; we pointed out the obvious gifts she had for administration and prayer, and some that weren't so obvious, like hospitality and creating liturgy. Over several years, while she was divorcing from her husband and forging ahead into a new and scary life, she was also moving forward to claim her dream.

When Merry was in her mid-60's, she bought some property in Hubbardston, MA with money from the divorce settlement and started her retreat center. She held classes, welcomed people for retreats, made it a place for trainings and events. It was her dream, come true, which she developed and ran until she retired ten years later. She was herself a holy friend to many, while she was able to live into her new life by the support of her own holy friends.

Do you have holy friends? If you do, cherish them and let them prod you, support you, and uncover deep dreams and gifts, and do the same for them. Be united in your prayer for one another. If you don't have a holy friend, ask God to provide one for you. We all need them. Our faith walk was never meant to be a lonely walk, but one we do in community.

We thank God for friends; even more, we thank God for holy friends. May we have them and be them to others. Amen.