

Sermon: Pentecost 18

The Rev. Mike Wernick

September 27, 2015

Year B

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29

Psalm 19:7-14

James 5:13-20

Mark 9:38-50

In our families of origin... we learn what's normal... even when our parents don't specifically sit us down and teach us... we learn what's normal even before we can speak... from eyes that roll in just a certain way right after something's said... from what's discussed and what isn't... from the patterns of family interaction... or lack thereof... from who eats when... who gets served first... whether there's conversation or TV during meals... and yes... even from comments made to the TV screen... in the countless details of daily life... we learn what's normal...

Last week we talked about how when we don't understand... we can be afraid to ask questions... in our families of origin we also learned about the questions we were allowed to ask... and about those we were not... today the lessons teach us that some things must remain in the past... about the prophetic voice... about stumbling blocks... and about what God intends for us...

Moses and the Israelites are in the wilderness... they're remembering what they had in Egypt and what they don't have now... they're remembering all the wonderful things they had to eat from the list we just heard... and they're complaining... they're hungry for God... but they experience it as physical hunger... and want to fill their bellies and distract themselves... and now all they've got is this lousy manna... and God became very angry... Moses had the bigger vision of where God was leading them... but it was hard for him to endure the constant complaining of so many... the burden of it was too heavy... the weight of it was too much... and he said: God... I thought I was doing your will... I thought I understood... I'm leading this people as best I can... but if this is how you're going to let them treat me... put me to death at once...

God realized that Moses needed others to share the load... so God organized a Vestry and a Council... God sent seventy elders outside of the camp... to the Tent of Meeting... the place where God and humans communed... and God took some of the wealth of Spirit that God had given to Moses... and re-distributed it among the seventy... and they prophesied... but there were two others... Eldad and Medad... in the camp... in the community... and the spirit rested on them and they prophesied too... and Joshua ran to tell Moses about these two interlopers... these two unauthorized prophets... these two Spirit stealers who had ideas but weren't on leadership... and Moses said... *Geesh... I wish everyone in the camp was a prophet...*

And in the Gospel... John said to Jesus... Teacher... we saw someone casting out demons in your name... but he wasn't following us... so we tried to stop him... but Jesus remembered... as we do from last week's Gospel... that the disciples had just been arguing about who would be the greatest... and they were too embarrassed to tell him... maybe they didn't want to share that particular wealth either...

And I've been following the Pope's visit this week... and listening to him speak Gospel... and so many of the commentators talk about what a remarkable message this is... at least to American ears... that a Pope could speak about moral imperatives that are independent of but supported by scripture and tradition... could speak so eloquently about our collective responsibility to immigrants... to our stewardship of the environment... to the economy... so that those who have much don't have too much and those who have little don't have too little... and it must seem so remarkable because so many people don't know this... are so unfamiliar with scripture... are so unchurched... are so out of touch with how God wants us to live... Jesus said... *the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few...* and today Jesus says... there's enough Spirit to go around... don't create a stumbling block...

The truth is... there are some things we don't see... or can't see... or don't want to see... that become stumbling blocks for us... a few weeks ago... Joel and I were out for

a walk... now sidewalks are intended to ease travel... but there was a raised section... about three inches high... that was all but invisible... and he tripped over it and fell and hurt himself... it had become a stumbling block... the lack of signage in museums or other places can become a stumbling block to visitors when they don't know where to go or where things are... what the Israelites had in Egypt became a stumbling block towards the new home to which God was leading them... and there are numerous other articles of faith and ideologies that become stumbling blocks when they're applied in the wrong way... or in a time and context that's no longer appropriate... for years... I stumbled over fundamentalist Christianity believing that it represented all of Christianity... but we lose sight of these things and stumble... Jesus doesn't tell us where and how and why we stumble... he simply tells us that we will...

And in our families of origin... when we learn what's normal... what we learn can become a stumbling block too... especially when we believe that it's normative... that it does... can... and should determine what's normal for everyone else... like whether it's normal to open gifts on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning... and we can either judge others for falling short of what's normal for us... or judge ourselves when we don't live up to what's normal for others...

Karoline Lewis... the associate professor of biblical preaching at Luther Seminary wrote: we *have* the potential to cause others to stumble... part of the truth of our human brokenness... part of our human condition... is that this is appealing somehow... but we also put stumbling blocks in our own paths... with no one else to blame... Jesus knows this and says that we should stop... just stop it... this isn't a competition... it isn't about who gets to the finish line 1st... or who is the best disciple... it's about following... and when you truly follow your eyes aren't on yourself or the person next to you... following takes paying attention to who is in front of you... not because you and the person next to you don't matter... but because the person you're following has a greater claim on how you see yourself... and how you see others...

This prescription not to judge others... not to argue about who's going to be first... not to put stumbling blocks in anyone's way... is so antithetical to what it is to be human... is so against the design of creation... so perverts the bonds of trust that ought to exist between people... that Jesus says if you do this... it'd be better for you to hang a millstone around your neck and just jump into the sea...

But as John Shea reminds us... the drives to be egocentric... to save one's own life... to be great... to lord it over others... and to harm others in order to save yourself... are the way of the world... these ways of thinking and acting have become so internalized into a second nature... they are like a hand... a foot... and an eye... if these drives are to give away to other-centeredness... losing one's life for the Gospel... being the least and servant of all... and not harming others... there must be clarity about what is at stake... and that is our relationship with God...

And when the disciples peel away what keeps them from entering abundant life... the feared *fire of damnation that never ends* becomes a purifying fire... and the emphasis is no longer on what was lost... but on what was preserved... the... fire... becomes... salt... purification becomes the preservation of what is essential...

We have been grafted into a new family... whether we've been baptized with water or with the Holy Spirit... if anyone is in Christ... there is a new creation... everything old has passed away... and has become new... our family of origin's rules no longer bind us... the world's obsession with power and greed no longer drive us... we can know who's taking the journey with us... along side us... but we keep our eyes on the One whom we follow... and just like Eldad and Medad... and like those about whom the disciples complained... we too are to take up the mantles of leadership... and not let them rest solely on Moses' shoulders... or on Jesus'...

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