

Lectionary 26 B 2021

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

September 26, 2021

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Mark 9:38-50

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

“Stop!” is the verb that connects our gospel reading today with our first reading. “Stop!” is what connects a reading from Numbers, the fourth book of the Torah, with Mark, the second Gospel. “Stop.” *Joshua the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, “My lord Moses, STOP them!”* Joshua— he has a whole book of the Bible named after him— Joshua told Moses to STOP those guys: Eldad, Medad. STOP them! And the twelve disciples of Jesus declare: “*We tried to STOP him, because he was not following us.*” STOP these people who are doing great things in the name of God. That’s the connection between the reading from the fourth book of the Torah and the reading from second Gospel: STOP them!

And in each of our readings, the one who is in charge DECLINES to stop the offenders. Moses is asked to stop it, but Moses declines that request. Jesus is asked to stop it, but Jesus declines that request. “Stop them!” say the people of God. “No, I will not,” says Moses, says Jesus. “Stop them,” the community says. “No,” the spiritual leader says.

And I think that’s a good enough story, story enough for us. There’s the people “out there.” There’s the people “in here.” And there’s the spiritual leader of the people in here. And the people in here say, “Stop those people out there!” But the spiritual leader in here says, “No, we will not stop those people out there.”

In the one case, Moses has gathered seventy elders of the people, seventy officers. Seventy respected community leaders. And some of the spirit that God has placed upon Moses, God takes some that spirit and distributes it over these seventy elders. And they exhibit a kind of charismatic ecstasy: prophesying. And that dies down. But apart from the seventy, these two other guys who had not been selected, they also exhibit the charismatic prophesying. And those two guys, Eldad and Medad, are the ones that Joshua tells Moses to stop.

So what’s the offense? It seems that God has reached town, and taken a glob of spiritual power off of Moses, and dropped that glob of spiritual power onto the seventy, but some of it dripped or splashed over onto Eldad and Medad. It’s sort of a happy story of abundance and exuberance. You know, if I ever adopted a pair of puppies, I would like to name them Eldad and Medad. It’s a happy blessing. As though God’s spirit is abundant. As though God’s spirit does not always flow in the channels that we think that it should. And yet, Joshua says, “Stop them!” Unauthorized spiritual activity!

A very similar thing is happening in the gospel reading. This time it is exorcisms. Some one is driving out demons in the name of Jesus. Some of you have seen the Hollywood movies where the exorcist says, "The power of Christ compels you!" Invoking that name helps to drive out the demons. The guy in the gospel of Mark who is doing exorcisms may very well be a clown. But by using the name of Jesus, he is successfully driving out demons. How could that be a bad thing? Demons are being expelled in the name of Jesus. How could that possibly hurt anyone, and how could that damage Jesus' brand? Jesus says, "*For no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.*" It doesn't hurt the brand, guys! If a clown performs an exorcism by using the powerful name of Jesus, that it is all to the good! *Whoever is not against us is for us.*

It's a good enough story that we have religious leaders like Joshua, and like Peter and Andrew and James and John, saying "Stop!" And Moses and Jesus saying, "No. Why should they be stopped. This is a good thing." That's enough of a story. That's enough of a sermon.

But I've still got five minutes. Let's think about why this happens. I said last Sunday that you and I are in a peculiar series of Sunday gospel readings. The "Disciples Acting Badly" section of Mark's gospel. Why do disciples act badly? In this section of Mark's gospel, it is almost always the case that the disciples are unable to think about anything but themselves. Jesus does some miracles, Jesus teaches some people, Jesus interacts with his opponents, Jesus impresses the crowds, and the disciples are always wondering how this affects them. From the Mayo Clinic website, I found this description of narcissistic personality disorder: "*Symptoms include an excessive need for admiration, disregard for others' feelings, an inability to handle any criticism, and a sense of entitlement.*" Do the disciples have narcissistic personality disorder?

- Excessive need for admiration. Mark 10, verse 37.
- Disregard for others' feelings. Mark 10, verse 13.
- An inability to handle any criticism. Mark 9, verse 32.
- A sense of entitlement. Mark 10, verse 28.

I'm not attempting a psychoanalytic assessment two millenia after the fact. But the disciples do seem unable to think about anything but themselves. "*Yes, Jesus saved someone's life today... But what about MY needs?*"

It's John, in today's gospel, who reveals the true motives: "*We tried to stop him, because he was not following us.*" He was not following us. There is a creeping tribal mentality here. Not us. Not following us. He may be following you, Jesus. But he's not following us. He's using the trademark without a proper licensing agreement, and we stand to lose royalties. This is John the Apostle speaking here. Ostensibly the beloved disciple, ostensibly the author of the fourth gospel, ostensibly the one who teaches the most about love. *He was not following us.*

And in our first reading, Moses puts his finger on the issue: *Are you jealous for my sake?* Jealousy. Joshua wants to protect team Moses, that tribe. By the way, Moses is burned out. "*I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me.*" So due to Moses'

burnout, God extends the spiritual leadership to seventy elders. And then Eldad and Medad also receive the gift, the anointing. And Moses is like, “This is 72 more people to help me. “I wish *everybody* would receive the Lord’s spirit, and take a share of the work.”

But instead we have “disciples acting badly.” I think that the greater good is what’s at stake here. It’s the greater good, versus my agenda, my pride, my expectations, my narcissistic personality disorder. And ultimately, it’s about the power of God. God is God, and God makes the rules. And if he wants to let some unauthorized clown to use the name of Jesus to do his will, who am I to say otherwise? And if Eldad and Medad are equipped to share the burdens of leadership, who am I to second-guess the goodness of God? But there is something about human nature, and something about religion, that makes us want to be in control. Which is the opposite of true religion. True religion ought to be that God is alive, and God is more important than me. And true religion ought to be about good coming into the world. More and more good, for more and more people. By definition, true religion is going to challenge my sense of self, and my sense of control. Of all the actors in today’s readings, Moses seems to be the only one other than Jesus who gets it. And it’s because he is burned out. He is depleted. He is already aware of his limits, and his lack of control. So three cheers for burnout! If burnout brings us closer to the real truth of religion.

Whoever is not against us is for us. Jesus says it so plainly, so eloquently. John had introduced that issue of “us” into the discussion. “He was not following us.” But Jesus says to the people in here that the people out there are a big part of our concern. True religion is about a true God, and a greater good, that is growing greater. That is our concern. Whoever is not against us is for us. Amen.