

Welcoming New Members

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

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This morning we welcome new members, including myself and Sheryl. Obviously none of us are entirely new to this congregation. But very often, when new people appear in any community, household or work place, they will receive some sort of orientation. Someone will take them around and tell them what's what, so that they can figure out where they fit and make themselves at home. More seasoned members may like to point out who will feel displaced if you sit in a certain pew, for example." (Just kidding). In a sense, the focus tends to be on how the new people will behave.

Instructions for Us

But as I read this morning's readings, I realized that they were less suitable as a guide for new members, and more suitable as a reminder to the already established congregation. If we apply them to this morning's induction of new members, I think the message is, don't get in the way of God's attempts to help us out by sending us new people. Do not be a "stumbling block" that will separate them from the grace-filled work God has in mind to fulfill through them.

Imagine seeing an unsuspecting person skipping along down the road, whistling a tune on a fine spring day, with lots of fine thoughts for how the summer might play out. There is a stone sticking up out of the road and whammy, the next thing you know that person is in a hospital bed and all the good things that might have taken place that summer never happen. In the Gospel reading Jesus is saying to us, “You don’t want to be that stone.”

And then he goes on, in shocking detail, to emphasize how vital this awareness is for our salvation. My feeling is that when he says that it would be better if a millstone were hung around our necks and we were thrown into the sea, or that it were better that we cut out various organs than be a stumbling block to others, he is using hyperbole; he wants to shock us into taking the matter as seriously as he does.

And I think it is a vital concern. God has a special design to fulfill through each person, a design that carries with it the potential to bring wonderful things into being, and to answer all our prayers. And it would be tragic to put a stop to what God is doing, out of the belief that what we think is appropriate necessarily has overriding value.

Society's Discontent

If we take the Old Testament reading and the Gospel reading together as a whole, they draw us a picture of our current reality that I think is surprisingly accurate. More and more, in recent times, the general public perceive itself to be languishing in the wilderness. And like the Israelites who complained that they did not have the “cucumbers, leeks and garlic,” like they had in the land of Egypt, we Americans are consumed with complaining about how things are not like they were in the “good old days.”

A Needy Congregation & World

And because so much of the grumbling is being directed at the institutions that are tasked with supporting and strengthening the bonds of society, we in the congregations are not immune. Over the decades, many good people have expressed their discontent with their feet, marching away from churches and civic institutions that they believe have failed them, leaving the brave few to run the ship.

And in the middle of many congregations sits a Moses-like figure – the pastor – who is prone to a complaint laden prayer of his own. It goes like this:

O Lord, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,' to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me.

And this complaint laden prayer, is not only the inner prayer of many a pastor, but also in many cases the prayer of the office holders and of many of the “doers” in a congregation. Why should it be my burden, they ask, to hold up a society in which everyone seems to grumble for good food, but they all pass, when the best food is offered, because they can't recognize it for what it is?

And so, in answer to this prayer of lament, God basically says, “Ok Moses. I'll send you some helpers.” First God has the 70 elders and officers gather. We can think of these as the equivalent of the church officers and the regulars who faithfully attend and make things happen. They all come together in the tent of meeting and with the prompting of the Holy Spirit, they pray and prophesy up a storm and pretty much leave it at that.

God Answers

But is this the end of God's answer to Moses's prayer? Is it simply a matter of the action of the Holy Spirit moving more dramatically among the established core? At the end of the story, a young man runs up to Moses and Joshua and tell them that two men who are not among the elders, both spirit-filled, have been prophesying elsewhere among the people.

Joshua and Moses's reactions are very telling. Joshua is alarmed and says to Moses, "You must stop them." He perceives that the action of the Holy Spirit has come from a previously unauthorized location and source among the people, and so he sees it as a threat to the established order that needs to be quashed immediately.

Moses, on the other hand, sees this additional outbreak of the Holy Spirit as an ongoing answer to his prayer, that the burden of caring for the people might fall on other shoulders as well. And so he responds by saying, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!"

This exchange between Moses and Aaron closely resembles the exchange between Jesus and his disciples at the beginning of the Gospel reading (which is probably why these two readings are paired in the lectionary). I'm referring to the place where John says to Jesus,

Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.

and Jesus replies,

Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.

And then Jesus goes on to warn them against being a stumbling block to any who believe in him.

A Universal Dilemma

I realize that the readings are fairly harsh in tone for a day of celebration such as this. But there are a several considerations that I hope will commend them to you as harsh in a way that is helpful.

First of all, I don't see the message as something that this congregation needs to be singled out to hear. Every congregation, indeed every group of people that has ever existed, faces the same reality in which

the powers that be will either embrace periodic realignments with grace or become isolated, overwhelmed and eventually cease to exist.

I'm sure that is part of the reason why Jesus is speaking to us with such shocking vehemence. He does it because the future of every grace-filled community matters so much to him and because the future of each rests on its ability to recognize and embrace the movement of the Spirit that comes to it from beyond itself.

Nor should we take any of this as a condemnation of the powers that be within a congregation. Very often the established order within a congregation, which is easily vilified, originates out of good motives. It is so easy for "doers" in a short-handed situation, to slip into the habit of taking things into their own hands. Rather than let things go undone they will say to themselves, "If I want this done right, I'm going to need to do it myself." And when that becomes a habit, it feels almost irresponsible to let go and trust others to come through. I confess that I too struggle with this at times.

And so I don't think we should use Jesus's strong words to characterize ourselves as "evil." Instead, I think we should put ourselves in the place

of Moses, praying for help and then have the insight to recognize it when it arrives. Because no church exists in order to burn out its core.

Everyone who comes to this church, from its established core, to the newest person, should be able to worship and serve in a way that brings nourishment and the strength they need for their daily lives. Did not Jesus say to Martha, who was incredibly busy and distracted with preparations that her sister Mary who sat quietly at his feet, had the better part? I am very much against our ever falling into the pitfall of being a place where members feel more overloaded and obligated to carry out tasks, then spiritually nourished.

Finally, I think that Jesus resorts to such grim and gruesome imagery, not out of any desire that we punish ourselves, but out of a desire to impress on us just what a great treasure we lose, if we are not able to recognize the grace and help that comes to us from beyond ourselves.

We live in a world that is struggling with division and loneliness and full of anger and grumbling, quick to point a finger of blame. And every one of us in this sanctuary, longs to be an answer to that suffering and to share the love of the “one who first loved us.” We would not be here unless we wanted to be a part of that answer.

And in answer to this very prayer, God has sent us this morning, fellow servants to share in both the burden and the joy of journeying together toward the promised land, a journey that will continue to nourish us with God's unfolding grace, if we are able to recognize and trust that this is so. So welcome, new members. Let us gladly join together in the best work there is, the good and healing work of making God's love visible and real in this world, so that God our creator may be glorified and God's praises sung forever more.