

Numbers 11:1-29

The Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost

September 26, 2021

"How do you catch a cold?"

It was an odd question, but my wife was using her "I had a bad day" voice so I took it seriously.

"Uh...germs? It's a virus?"

"Yes! My students keep coming to class with coughs and sniffles! 'Oh, teacher, I was out in the rain and now I have a cold.' No! It's a virus! You caught a cold because you caught a virus! I'm going to make a little Powerpoint presentation and the next time one of my students says "I caught a cold because it was cold outside," I'm going to stop the class and show it to them!"

...

"Do I sound crazy?"

"A little bit, yeah."

It does sound a bit crazy, but the point is responsibility. If getting a cold is just something that happens to you because it's cold outside, just an act of nature, then it's just bad luck - nothing you can do about it. If it's a virus, you take precautions. You wear

a mask. You stay home when you're sick. You don't expose your teacher and your classmates.

If you aren't powerless in the face of circumstances - if you have the *ability* to *respond* - then you have *responsibility*.

If you don't have power, then you don't have responsibility.

Moses wishes people would understand that.

The Israelites are two years out of Egypt, in the wilderness of Sinai. God has ordered their life and given them laws to live by; God leads them as a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night. But suddenly, in Numbers 11, the people start complaining. "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic, but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."

The manna is like little coriander seeds, and the Israelites grind it and boil it and bake it into cakes. It's nourishing, but not very interesting. They remember the variety of delicious foods in Egypt; they seem to have forgotten the backbreaking labour, the infanticide, and other delights.

So they complain to Moses; God gets angry; Moses feels caught in the middle. Moses can't conjure food out of midair; neither can he make the Israelites happy with their lot. He doesn't have much power; but he ends up with most of the responsibility.

That's a surefire recipe for burnout. "I am not able to carry all this people alone," he says, "for they are too heavy for me."

Has this happened to you? I know many of you have chronic illnesses, or your partners do. We're supposed to be responsible for each other. And yet what can you do? What can you do when your partner has cancer? You can't cure them. You can't hurt for them. You can't be afraid or angry or sad for them. But...you feel like you should. So you hold their hand and you sit up with them. You shop for them and cook for them and clean up for them. You wish you could do more. You feel responsible. But you have no power. It's all up to you, like Moses. All you can do is shout at God, like Moses. That's a recipe for burnout.

Many people are afraid the church has cancer; many people look at the stats and say, "The church will vanish in ten years, or twenty, or thirty." We love the church. We do everything we can for the church. Every dollar and moment we can spare from our work and family and personal lives, we give to the church. At the annual meeting when we hopefully ask, "you'll stay in your role, right?" And you look around you see no other volunteers, and you say, "Yes." You come to church every Sunday, you teach Sunday School, you lend your stiff hands and your painful back and your handyman knowledge...because there's nobody else. You feel responsible for saving the Church.

But you don't have that kind of power, and you know it. That's a recipe for burnout, just like Moses.

So God answers his people. God answers Moses. And how does he do it? There are two problems. The first problem: the people have no meat. It's a shame our lectionary leaves out God's solution, because it's sort of funny. "You want meat?" says God. "I'll give you meat. I'll give you meat every day for a month. I'll give you meat until you're sick of it. I'll give you meat until it comes out your nose." Yes, that's a direct quote. Apparently God is having a bad day, too. Moses doesn't believe God can do it, but God covers the land in quail to a depth of several feet.

But the second problem is Moses. Moses is burnt out from being God's only spokesman and thus the only target for the people's frustration. So what does God do?

"Summon seventy elders of the people," he says. Moses does so. They're probably some of the loudest complainers, since they speak for the people. God has Moses station them around the tent where the people gather to hear Moses proclaim the word of God. And he takes the Spirit - the Holy Spirit that enables Moses to proclaim the Word - and spreads it around to all the seventy elders. Suddenly they all start prophesying - in other words, they start proclaiming the Word of God also. What do they say? Presumably, the same the things that Moses has already been saying. What does this accomplish? I think it disproves that suspicion that some of them may hold: that Moses is just saying

whatever comes into his head instead of speaking for God. When these elders, seventy of them, suddenly start singing the same tune as Moses, it becomes clear that Moses really has been speaking for God. "They did not do so again," says the passage, but the point has been made, and these seventy elders at least now have firsthand knowledge of the will and Word of God. Moses is no longer the only one responsible for speaking for God. This is the path to a renewed ministry.

Except - and here's the weird and wonderful part - except for these two guys, Eldad and Medad, who *also* receive the Spirit. Who are they? Nobody special. They're "registered," but that just means they're considered part of Israel rather than some Gentile hangers-on. Maybe it means that when God spreads the Holy Spirit around, she does it so extravagantly that some of it splashes beyond the seventy onto these two guys. Or maybe it means that God doesn't put all of her eggs into one basket. Maybe she has some side projects going that don't involve Moses and the rest of the main cast. Maybe it means that she is always inviting people to join in proclaiming what she is up to, and on this day, two guys named Eldad and Medad get caught up in the excitement. They have the ability to respond to what God is doing. The response-ability moves beyond the official circles.

Joshua is concerned for Moses' honour, but Moses couldn't be happier. The more people who speak for God, the better. This is the path to renewed ministry, and this is the

episode that is taken up in our New Testament reading. The word "complaining" doesn't show up much in the New Testament, but the same word is used of the Israelites who complain about the food and the Jewish leaders who complain about Jesus who says "I am the bread of life." Just as Moses takes no offense at Eldad and Medad, these leaders should take no offense at him. God has raised up a new prophet. Similarly, the Word of God does not end with Jesus, either. The unnamed exorcist has heard of what God is doing in Jesus and, inspired by the Spirit of God, is continuing his work.

From Moses to Eldad and Medad, to Jesus to the unnamed exorcist, the message is clear: we are not called to take all the responsibility unto ourselves. God is always raising up new prophets to speak the Word, and usually they appear outside of the usual channels where we expect to find them.

You do not have the responsibility to save your partner; you are called to serve and proclaim the Good News in your acts of companionship and service. You are not called to save the Church; you are called to do what you can, what the Spirit has called you to do.

You cannot do it alone; you are not supposed to do it alone; you are part of something bigger, stranger, and more wonderful.

Amen.