

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

Mark 9:38-50

James 5:13-20

“Let the words of our mouths and
the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable to you, O Lord.” AMEN!

Many preachers begin, or end,
their sermons with the words
I just quoted from Psalm 19.

Don't you love it when the things
we become accustomed to saying or
singing during worship pop up in our
scripture readings?

I do, too.

It reminds us how grounded we are
with the Bible in our liturgy.

These grounding words are professed
from the preacher asking God to let
their pondering and prayer,

which lead to the words proclaimed from the mouth,
be spoken and heard the way God
wants them spoken and heard.

This congregation has a history of 68 years
together proclaiming the mystery of spoken word
and inspired hearing.

Think of that for a moment.

68 years of people coming and going.

Births to Baptisms to
 Communion to Celebrations of Life and
 everything else in between.

From worshipping in other buildings to
 having a building and property of our own,
 there's a rich history of prayer and growth,
 with the occasional disagreements and conflicts,

but still a resounding message of love and
 an action to follow Jesus into places of service.

We may not always like to think of the difficult times
 but it's good to be reminded of them so that
 we are prepared for the future ones and
 have the strength to move into and
 through them, too.

The times when St. Stephen shared
 the burden of leadership were (and are)
 the times when we are at our best.

The times when the prophetic word here
 was most powerful was when people reminded
 one another that, even in the midst
 of complaining or lament,

a voice would come out of the assembly
reminding us that the real need is to
not focus on ourselves but on others around
us that are suffering. (Pause)

In the reading from Numbers, today,
we hear how Moses was trapped between
a suffering people and a vengeful God.

As their intermediary, Moses was both
part of the people and a mouthpiece for God.

Lower than God, but
elevated by God.

That can be a lonely and dangerous place
since human beings have the tendency
to blame and kill the messenger.

Yet, Moses acts in ways that many leaders fail to do.

You know what I'm talking about!

Most leaders, when they meet times of struggle,
or recognize that their strategies might
not be working out the way they'd planned,
don't accept responsibility,
no most tend to blame others.

"They messed up, God! Not me."

I'm amazed at Moses' ability to NOT do this.

He could have sidled up with God and said,
"Yeah, their hopeless, God.

It's time to wipe the slate clean and start over.
No one's as good as your best bud, Moses." (Pause)

It's funny cause it's true!

Moses didn't do that.

He pleaded to God as one of the suffering.

"If this is the way you are going to treat me,
put me to death at once! But, if I have found favor
in your sight do not let me see my misery."

It's a plea that finds a reply from God
about shared leadership.

The same thing that makes churches and
assemblies and governments healthy today,
is shared leadership.

Moses selected 70 elders and God addressed them
and put God's spirit on them and they
prophesied in the tent.

The lesson goes on to say,

“But then they did not do so again.”

Meaning... when they left the tent
they stopped prophesying, but then
something peculiar happened.

Two fellas, Medad and Eldad, who were
not in the tent, went about prophesying around
the people in the camp.

Did the Spirit escape the tent?

It looks that way!

Joshua thought it was a threat to Moses' authority
and advised that he put a stop them,
but Moses knew he couldn't have his cake
and eat it too.

Meaning, if he's going to share leadership
then he must share it even in good times.

“Wouldn't that be amazing if the Lord put
the Spirit on everyone!
May it be so,” Moses proclaimed.

If you've ever wondered why (or how)
most churches continue to not
just survive, but thrive, it is because
they've rejoiced when God's Spirit
rested on an unexpected person.

When a congregation is disciplined to listen
to the Spirit coming from someone other than
the pastor then surprising (and enlightening)
perspectives are brought to life,
especially when the person is a child.

Why a child?

Because that's where we least expect it,
and God loves to demonstrate God's power
through the people we least expect.

I'm not saying pastoral leadership isn't needed,
but I am saying that the pastor does not have
the sole corner of the market when it
comes to the Holy Spirit.

Jesus affirmed this when he took a child into
his arms and placed them in the
center of the disciples and taught them
about welcome.

Remember, last week?

This is all taking place around the disciples arguing
about who was the greatest among them. (Pause)

Is it ironic or prophetic, that this text comes up
in the midst of our nation's conversations
about leadership and preparations

for the November elections?

“I am better than she is.”

“I am better than he is.”

The arguing about who's best crescendos
as we grow closer to November.

Yet, in the midst of the people's cries
for strong leadership, perhaps Jesus' illustration
calls us to pay attention to what
strong leadership might encompass.

Does it come from a single individual? Should it?

Moses would say, no and today's lesson
reveals that God would, too.

Leadership is something to be shared,
less it become authoritarianism.

Jesus would say, does the prospective leader
listen to others?

Would they listen to a child?

Welcome a child? (Hmm) (Pause)

There's much to be said about what Jesus goes on
to say in the gospel about cutting off hands
and poking out our own eyes when they sin.

Truly there's hyperbole in them
to get our attention and to be sure the words
remain in our minds.

But, I think, what is even more important is
what happened in the context of this difficult
teaching that led Jesus to speak so strongly.

Jesus just told them about what would
happen to him in Jerusalem for the second time
(that was last week's lesson).

The disciples did not understand and
they were afraid to ask.

Jesus then confronted the disciples about
their arguing about who's the greatest among them,
so Jesus gathers them together and
tells them,

"Whoever wants to be first
must be last of all and
servant of all."

Then, he takes the little child into his arms and said,
"Whoever welcomes this child welcomes me,
and whoever welcomes me
welcomes not only me but
the one who sent me."

Welcome child, welcome Jesus, welcome God.

Imagine a presidential candidate saying
something like this!

It's central to our faith, however, and
it must have been a time of silence and
prayer when Jesus spoke the words...

And then Disciple John comes in
"Teacher, we saw someone casting out
demons in your name, and we tried
to stop him because he's was
not following US!"

No wonder Jesus went ballistic!

Jesus with a child and teaching about
welcoming and being servant to all
when John wants to change the subject and
get back to the "We're better than
they are," stuff.

No wonder Jesus gets angry and uses harsh words.

Such a moment was putting a stumbling block
in the way of little ones who believe in Jesus.

"Millstone around your neck and
dropped into the sea,
hand, foot, eye removal they are all better
for you, Jesus said

compared to the judgment you'll
receive if you neglect protecting children.

Jesus pointed to the ways human beings
misuse power and manipulate the powerless.

It's the children who suffer. (Pause)

So, we will be different.

We will put children in the center and
welcome them and listen to them AND
teach them while letting them teach us.

AMEN!