

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29 Bill Uetricht 9.23.21 18 Pentecost

There are some Biblical readings that are just too good not to preach on them. Today's first reading from Numbers is clearly one of them. This ancient tale is funny and very relatable. Although the story is clearly pre-modern, it, nonetheless, resonates with our lives. As we read it and as we complete the story, we can say, "Yep, we've been there."

The story begins this way, according to Eugene Petersen in **The Message Bible**: "The riff-raff among the people had a craving and soon they had the people of Israel whining, 'Why can't we eat meat? We ate fish in Egypt—and got it free—to say nothing of the cucumbers and melons, the leeks, onions, and garlic. But nothing tastes good out here; all we get is manna, manna, manna,'" spam, spam, spam, spam.

I find it interesting that it is a small group of people who cause all the Israelites to whine. Been there. Done that! And I also think it is interesting that it is food that causes the whining. Been there. Done that. You want to get people worked up, mess with their food. Put them at the end of the line for the potluck. Run out of food. Don't show up with their coffee.

I had a young woman in my office the other day who told me that she had quit working at a local restaurant. She did so for many reasons, but a primary one, she said, was that too many people today live as if they are *entitled*. Wow, I've heard this critique from many people, especially those who are older. But here was a young woman who got tired of putting up with whining.

And this is precisely where Moses finds himself today in our Numbers reading. He, the leader, is overwhelmed with the whining that is taking place among his people. His leadership is being called into question. And this is where I want to get to today because I think in many ways our texts for today are about leadership. Moses is the leade

and is feeling the weight of his people's critique, their protest about food. And by the way, I am not sure I would call the Israelites *entitled*. Oh, that all we longed for would be leeks, melons, and a little less manna!

But still, Moses, the leader is overwhelmed. And Moses, the leader, becomes vulnerable. "Why have you treated me so badly," Moses says to God? "Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I create these people? Did I give birth to them? Did I breast feed them? How am I supposed to come up with food for them to eat, all the meat that they want? I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If you are going to treat me this way, you might as well just put me to death now. Save me from the misery of having to listen to all these whining people."

Ever felt overwhelmed? Ever felt a little self-pity? Been there! Done that!

And note! Moses is the *leader*. Leaders feel self-pity. They feel overwhelmed. Now truthfully, I think self-pity can sometimes look ridiculous on us. It looks ridiculous on Moses as he says he'd rather die than have to hear all the complaining. But let's not stop there. Overwhelmed-ness is real. Yes, sometimes we need to get a grip on things. Yes, sometimes we overreact. But being a leader, whether that be at school, at church, in the political realm, at home is big-time responsibility. And being responsible sometimes is overwhelming. Many of us during the pandemic have learned that lesson the hard way. So many decisions had to be made. So much change had to be implemented. Don't be surprised that leaders are overwhelmed and feeling a little sorry for themselves.

What's more, if Moses is the consummate leader, and much of the Bible thinks that, maybe we shouldn't spurn the self-pity and

overwhelmed-ness that leaders often experience. Grace prevails even for leaders. Good leaders can be honest. They can be vulnerable. They say sometimes, “This is too much. I can’t do it by myself.” Moses as he is leading the people, is bold enough to lay it on the line with God. His relationship with God is secure enough that he can presume upon the relationship. “You gave me more than I really bargained for. Now help me out!”

And God responds to his cries. And the response is not, “Moses, don’t feel sorry for yourself,” a response I think sometimes is appropriate. Sometimes we just need to knock it off. Sometimes we overstate things, take ourselves and life entirely too seriously. Been there! Done that! But in the Numbers story, this is not God’s response to Moses. In this text, God is gracious. God simply says, “Let’s see what we can do about the problem.”

And what he does about the problem is to seek help for Moses. He calls 70 of the elders of the people together and takes some of the spirit that was on Moses and places it on them. I love this ancient concept. The idea is that the leader has been bestowed with a big portion of the spirit of God that enables the leader, in this case, Moses, to lead with the power of God. Some of that spirit is then shared with others so that they can lead. Moses has got some help now. The burden isn’t simply on his shoulders.

Good leaders can’t do it on their own. My wife will tell you that this is an area where one of my faults makes itself known. I do too much on my own. I probably have gotten points in my life, from myself mostly, for accomplishing a lot all by myself. And what’s more, I say what others often say: sometimes it just seems easier to do it by myself. Getting others involved is a lot of work.

But good leaders will look to others for support. Leaders *need* others because let’s face it, not only is there too much to do for a lone

ranger to handle it all, no leader is indispensable or will be around forever. Eventually, Moses will die, as will all leaders. Good leaders share burdens, recognizing their own limits and also the truth that others have gifts that bless the whole community.

Sometimes we will be surprised by who those others are. And that is part of the point of the Numbers story and our gospel reading for today. Two men in Numbers, Eldad and Medad, had received a portion of Moses' spirit, but evidently, hadn't show up for the official meeting that gathered all the elders together. They start prophesying (speaking) in the camp, and Joshua, the assistant to Moses, wants to stop them because they don't have the right credentials and perhaps could be perceived as a threat to Moses' leadership.

But Moses isn't threatened. Good leaders are not threatened by other leaders who are doing good work. Good leaders welcome the Eldads and Medads of the world, the people who are casting out demons in the name of Jesus, even though they are not following the disciples. Just because someone or a group of someone are not a part of our club does not mean that they are not doing good things and assisting us in the work that belongs to all of us. By the way, you should know that the disciples who are all worked up because of the demon-casting efforts of some foreigners are the very ones who weren't able to cast out demons themselves just a little earlier in the Gospel of Mark. Can you say a little jealousy? Been there! Done that!

Moses' response to the non-card-carrying prophets is not jealousy, but rather, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!" Good leaders welcome other leaders. In fact, they long for everybody to take on leadership roles. After all, and this is something that many of you don't trust, all of us come gifted. All of us have a role to play. All of us, in one way or another, are to be leaders.

I have to tell you that in my thirty-some years of parish ministry, I have never heard as often as I do right now, “Ya, I am probably willing to help, but I don’t want to lead.” I wonder why so many folks say this. There are probably many reasons. We’re super busy. We think more and more about our individual and family lives, rather than our communal lives. We these days dismiss and make fun of leaders. We have developed such a specialty mindset that we think that in no way could we be leaders in areas that we don’t specialize in.

There’s probably a multitude of reasons why so many of us don’t want to lead these days but hear this. Many of us who do lead are like Moses, saying, “Oh, that all of God’s people would be leaders.” And this is particularly true right now. Many are checking out of leadership roles in the church. Yet these new days will necessitate good leaders who will help the church move courageously into an unknown future.

What we are about, the kingdom of God, the reign of God, the *high way*, as our theme suggests, will require leadership. No, not bossy leadership. Not leadership that excludes. Not leadership that is about building up our little clubs. But leadership, nonetheless. Leadership that is vulnerable. Leadership that cries out to God. Leadership that is collaborative, working with and trusting the gifts of others. Leadership that is not threatened by others and their successes. Leadership rooted in grace and focused on following Jesus, the one headed toward the cross.