

Sermon for PENTECOST SUNDAY, May 11 2008 Yr 'A'
Numbers 11:24-30: Psalm 104:25-35,37: 1 Corinthians 12:3-13: John 7:37-39
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The Old Testament reading today raises for us the question, "Who has the right to prophecy, or perhaps, preach in the name of God?"

The background to this story is that Moses talked to God because he was feeling the pressure of having to be the only one who could make decisions. In his talking with God it became clear that he needed to involve others in the leadership of this newly forming nation. In his conversation with God, Moses concluded that he needed seventy-two leaders. He came out of his tent and called them to come to the tent, perhaps the tent in which they carried the Ark of the Covenant. If we consider, that seventy went to the tent and two remained inside we get seventy-two and this would give six leaders to each of the twelve tribes.

And the Spirit of God came upon them. Our translation has it that they prophesied *but did not do so again*. An alternative reading of this says that they prophesied *and could not stop*. Whatever happened to those seventy is not the real issue of the story. What is of more importance is that *two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other name Medad, and the spirit rested on them, they were among those registered but they had not gone out to the tent*. In other words, they should have been at the tent when the Spirit of the Lord called them. So, why did they not go? It's possible they did not feel worthy; that they did not believe they had the calling; that they were persuaded by others to consider a different type of service.

There are many who are called to a specific ministry; to be ministers, doctors, nurses, teachers, etc., but for a variety of reasons they hold back,

they don't believe they can do it. And yet, throughout their life they find themselves doing some of that to which they were called or being close to those who are living out this calling. And today we find many people going into what is referred to as second careers when in fact they are going into a ministry to which they were called initially.

When Eldad and Medad began to prophecy, a young man ran to report them, to tattle tale on them, to Moses telling him that they were doing something he judged they should not be doing.

Moses' assistant, determined to establish his authority, said to Moses, *My Lord, Moses, stop them!* But Moses replied, *Are you jealous on my account? I only wish that all of God's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on all of them"*

A similar situation happens when Jesus sends out the disciples to preach. At one point they return to tell Jesus *there is a man here working miracles in your name what are we to do with him? And Jesus simply replies "If he is not against me he must be with me."*

Once again we have a problem with those who think that only certain people are given the spirit of the Lord. Fifteen years or so later, as the fledgling Christian Church developed, there were rifts in terms of who was baptized by whom. And before the church was fifty years old there were at least three distinct groups claiming Paul as their source of authority and yet their theological views were contradictory.

The sect of the Nazarenes or, The Way, as they were sometimes called, began to develop into a Church or community called Christians. The

Initial leadership was communal and charismatic. The charismatic persons were the ones who often were the leaders for it was understood that they were filled with the Spirit. With this communal leadership came the all too human problem of authority and the issue of whose gift was greater or better.

Paul settled the matter, to some degree, by telling them that it was the same Spirit that give them all their gifts but the spirit give each individual different gifts. *Now there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*

That last sentence is well worth thinking about and repeating: *To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.* We are not given gifts of leadership, teaching, healing, etc. for personal gain – however we understand that. We are given these gifts for the good of the community in which we live. The church is to be a community based on and around a variety of gifts that are to be used for the common good. This was and remains a radical idea. The church was meant to be a counter-cultural movement.

Communism was a short-lived attempt at this concept of communal sharing. Instead, what happened was one dictatorship replaced another. The closest thing we have to this form of communal living is a monastery or convent. People left the secular world to live in the deserts and many of them formed communal living communities based on the idea of Paul. The

Rule of St. Benedict remains one of the most common forms lived by many people in community and by many others who use it as a framework for their daily life. In the monastic/convent lifestyle anyone can be elected to positions of leadership but they are aware that it remains a communal

leadership and those who live this have a happier and more contented community.

Within a hundred years of the early church development, the belief system of one group, the Proto- orthodox, became dominant, a hierarchical leadership system parallel to the Roman Empire secular structure emerged and those placed in charge took it upon themselves to protect what they considered to be the truth. The writings of those deemed to be heretics were banned and destroyed. In 1946 some of these writings that were hidden and not burned, were discovered and we are rediscovering the breadth of understanding of the early church about Jesus.

In John's Gospel we read, *Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.*

The problem with organized religion is that at times it has taken upon itself to say what is truth, or become focused on issues and forget where the Spirit is leading us. Periodically the church has experienced a surge of the Spirit through a variety of Charismatic movements that have pushed the organized church out of its comfort zone only to be confronted by a power greater than itself.

In Lambeth Conferences and Vatican Councils, In General Conventions and Diocesan Councils, in prayerful Vestry meetings, in small prayer and/or study groups we experience the Spirit of the Lord like the sound of silence or, at other times, like a howling wind, calling us or driving us into directions we are not comfortable.

It is at times like these some of us prefer to have someone in charge to tell us what is right, what is the truth, what should we do. It is at times like these some of us are more comfortable with the uncomfortableness, knowing that we are not in charge and trusting that, in the end, God is in charge.

When all is said and done, regardless of how the Church chooses to organize itself, we return to the words of Micah and Jesus for what is important: *do justice and walk humbly with your God. When I was hungry you gave me to eat. When I was thirsty you gave me to drink. When I was naked you clothed me. When I was sick you visited me, when I was in prison you came to me. As long as you do it to one of these, the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it to me.*