

Numbers 11: 4-6, 10-16, 24-29
James 5: 13-20
Mark 9: 38-50
18 Pentecost, Proper 21

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Bainbridge Island, Washington
September 27, 2015

“In With the In-Crowd”

Nobody likes a snitch. Nobody likes whining – from other people. Nobody likes sanctimonious advice delivered in that infuriating tone of voice that implies, “I know better than you.” This is so because we don’t like being wrong – especially when we are wrong. This reason we don’t like being wrong is that it makes us feel like a fool, a dunce, an outsider – not part of the chosen, not accepted, not thought cool. And most of us like to be in with the in-crowd. As the popular song goes, we like to go where the in-crowd goes, we like to know what the in-crowd knows.

So, all three of our readings today fall into that group of people that nobody likes. John and the disciples are snitching on the outsiders who were casting out demons in the name of Jesus, and they compound the problem by whining about being shown up by that despised out-crowd. The Israelites are whining again about how bad it is in the Sinai and Moses, probably in frustration and not a little fear, starts whining himself about the burden of being the leader of this intractable, stiff-necked people. Even with the appointment of helpers, the whining continues as outsiders get to have powers thought only fit for insiders. So much for that staff reorganization plan. And in our Letter of James, we get good advice but it has the sense of someone superior telling you how you should feel and act. Sometimes prayer doesn’t work – at least the way we would like it to work. The last time I spoke to my father, who was in great pain, I told him that I was praying for him. After a very long pause, he said, “Well, could you pray harder?” Perhaps I am not very good at prayers.

Ability and leadership can spring up almost anywhere in God’s kingdom. It is not who does the good deed that matters, what matters is that the good deed is done and for the right reasons. Dismissing those who do good because they don’t fit our preconceptions of do-gooders is to fail to understand the generosity of God and the expansiveness and pervasiveness of God’s expressions of love as brought to us through the workings of the Holy Spirit. And for Jesus, for his most intimate followers to make this particular error brings out some of his most graphic metaphors. Those amputation metaphors seem so out of character for gentle, loving Jesus. But they are metaphors – an effort to get the disciples to pay attention. They are not, I repeat not, policy statements about how the church should handle mistakes. The bishop does not own any millstones, thank goodness – as far as I know. These metaphors are warnings to the disciples and to all who aspire to leadership positions within faith communities that God will not take kindly to our efforts to control or deny God’s efforts to bring about justice and peace in this world. When we impose our own core values on the lives of others without listening carefully to how and where those core values overlap or clash, we need to stop, reflect, discern and pray for insight in how we might proceed.

And yet, we do this over and over again. We want to be in the “in-crowd” so we turn otherwise ordinary people – people very much like us – into scapegoats and enemies. We declare certain ways of looking or acting as wrong and we despise people and isolate them because someone

said we should. We enflame our fears and stoke them into conflagrations that destroy innocent lives. We literally and metaphorically arm ourselves so that we might feel safer and then shoot ourselves in the foot – literally and metaphorically. We create fear and hatred by our constant worrying about God’s work being done among those we don’t think God should be helping. We undercut our own sense of fairness, equity, and opportunity, the very things we claim make us different from other people, in our benighted effort to advance fairness, equity, and opportunity our way.

We listen too much to those who would reserve salvation for those who they like and deny salvation to those who are not alike. We forget our reminder from Numbers that after Moses got God’s agreement that Moses needed help, even after the seventy had been appointed, two not so appointed also received the spirit of God. We can never control the workings of the Holy Spirit. It may come to people in positions of leadership or not. It may come to people who we think are filled with God’s power or it may not. The power of the Holy Spirit comes when it will and where it will. And that always makes people in positions of earthly power very nervous because they cannot control such things, much as they might like to do so. Again and again, God throws up people of power and vision and, again and again, we ignore them or oppose them but their message is unstoppable.

We should always seek leadership; we should always teach leadership and nurture leadership. We need people to take responsibilities – to stand in the heat of the kitchen and bring about the work of mission. But we will always be surprised, from time to time, when people we thought would be “naturals” turn out not to be so. We will always be surprised, from time to time, when it is the unlikely candidate who has the right combination of gifts at the most needed moment. There really are red-nosed reindeer in the world and sometimes the emperor really is stark naked.

Our common work is to discern what our core values are individually and collectively and how and where these values can work together to the larger and more important goal of building up God’s kingdom. For, as it turns out, we can learn to express our core values, we can be an in-crowd, in ways that respectful of our own values and respectful of the values of others. Moreover, our core values are growing and sometimes changing through life experiences. One of the better ways of discerning one’s own core values is to be exposed to the core values of others. Learning about human diversity, cultural, religious, political, and social differences can be profoundly helpful in understanding our own deepest beliefs and truths. And we should always remember Eldad and Medad – those outsiders who were given better gifts than the seventy elders. And we should always remember that little child plopped in Jesus’ lap to the consternation of his disciples. We should remember that person whose different views annoy us but makes us think again. We should remember that lone holdout in the jury room who, in the end, brought others to a verdict of justice. We should remember the people who salt us with their differing views and cure us from our own biases. Like salt, human differences preserve us by changing us. We need salt for life; just as we need fire for life. Too little salt or too little fire brings death; too much salt or too much fire also brings death. We live as we so often do in that muddled middle ground, seeking the right amount of difference so that we might be fully alive, giving and receiving salt and fire in our lives.

Being in with the in-crowd by excluding others is a fool's bargain and creates a stumbling block for ourselves and for others. It stands in complete violation of the Way of Jesus, that Way that always welcomed others and made room for them – to be themselves – and still be part of the flock. Jesus does not care where we've been or what we have thought; with Jesus there is always room for one or two more. There is no limit to God's in-crowd. So, stop whining, stop complaining, stop comparing, just come on down to God's in-crowd. Amen.