

Sermon (6/4/17, Numbers 11: 24-30):

A dark and vile mood had settled in upon the wilderness congregation Moses had been charged to lead. This time it was about the variety in their menu. When they first complained about being hungry, God had sent them manna and, for a while, it was enough. It kept them alive. Each day they would go out and collect what they needed-no more, no less. They would grind it in mills or beat it in mortars, then boil it in pots and make cakes out of it. It was sweet to the taste and it was enough. For Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner, they ate Manna. Every day of every week, of every month, they ate Manna and, you guessed it, they grew sick of it. There was only so much that could be done to dress it up.

When I was young, the go to Manna of the day was ground beef. It was the least expensive of meats and a standard of sustenance for families like ours where budgets were tight. Every effort was made to come up with new recipes for this dietary staple. Casseroles, meatloaf, meatballs, soups, hamburgers, mixing it with tomatoes, French onion soup mix, or cheese. At the core, however, the main ingredient remained the same – ground beef.

‘You know, Moses,’ complained the congregation, ‘Back when we were slaves in Egypt we ate cucumbers, and melons, and leeks, and onions, and garlic. This manna, day in and day out, is killing us. We’re beginning to think we should have never left Egypt.’

It’s difficult to get too upset with this congregation. It’s kind of hard to keep people interested when everyone shows up at a congregational pot-luck with the same dish of manna. ‘Oh look! Sally brought manna casserole.... again. Harriet brought Manna meatballs... again. And for dessert, well Mary brought Manna Jell-O...again. Oh, dear God what I would give for some fried chicken!’

So, the people complained and they wept. Moses could hear them in their tents at night. It made him feel like a true failure.

It happens in the best of congregations. People complain about things that are done and things that are left undone. People complain about the good ole days when, back there in Egypt, we had great pot-luck dinners. People complain about decisions that leaders make even though

there might be details they are unaware of. People blame their leaders for all kinds of things...even boring menus.

It takes its toll. Moses feels like a failure and it hurts. There's a reason church leaders are in the position they're in. It's called love – love of the God who tasked them with that responsibility and love of the people God has given them to care for, teach, and guide. Failure hurts.

'I think you made a mistake, God.' Moses says. "I'm sorry. I've tried but, clearly, it's not enough. Quite frankly, I'd rather die than be this kind of failure.'

God's response is immediate. He tells Moses to gather seventy Elders around his tent. God's beloved Moses is in trouble. The job is too big for one person.

Moses heeds God's command. The elders gather and a cloud descends from heaven enveloping them all. A delicate surgery ensues – a Spirit transplant if you will. A portion of the Spirit is lifted from Moses and shared with the seventy elders. The result is swift as each of them break out in a frenzy of Prophetic ecstasy. It must have been quite the sight but what kind of sight was it? Did they fall into a trance? Did they speak in other languages and did tongues of fire land on their heads like it did for Jesus' disciples on the first Pentecost? We don't know.

It does remind us, though, that talking about the Spirit is a challenge. Jesus was a human being – born of Mary, suffered and died. As human beings ourselves, we have a pretty good idea of who Jesus was and what he was like.

God the Creator, also known as God the Father or Parent, creates. We mortals know what it's like to be creative. Granted, God's creating abilities are far beyond ours but we know what it's like to dream and then try to turn that dream into something tangible and real.

The Spirit, however, that's tough. 'The Spirit is like the wind.' I tell my confirmation class. You can feel it, you know it's there, but you can't hold it and you can't shape it and you can't control it.

Sometimes the wind feels like a wonderful gift as it glides over our skin, bringing refreshment to our overheated bodies on a hot summer's day. Sometimes the wind can be strong, dangerous, and unpredictable like

a tornado rising up out of nowhere, wiping out a row of houses. Even with all our sophisticated technology, the wind is a formidable force that refuses to be handled or even predicted.

This is the lesson that Moses' people will soon learn. The Spirit is like the wind. Once unleashed, there's no telling what will happen.

The Spirit settles on the seventy elders and they burst into an impossible to describe prophetic frenzy. The Spirit transplant had taken. A problem quickly arises, however. Eldad and Medad were not part of the gathered seventy. Apparently, they were among the ones Moses had chosen but, for some reason, they didn't get the memo to show up at Moses' tent. Even so, they too received a portion of the Spirit and broke out into a frenzied prophetic rant right there in the middle of the camp.

Seeing this, Joshua and others are put out. They rush to Moses to complain.

"We can't have this, Moses!" They said. "We have standards. The people who showed up at the tent were obedient – doing what God told them to do. They deserved to receive the Spirit. They earned the right to be a leader. Eldad and Medad, not so much. It's not fair, Moses. I tell you, it's just not fair."

To Moses' credit, he applauds the Spirit's move and reprimands the complainers. 'Oh, if only God would make everyone prophets.' He says.

So, here's the scary lesson this passage teaches. The part of the Trinity that we most rely on to connect us with the holy is wild. There's no predicting it, containing it, or controlling it.

Think of someone you believe least deserving of the Spirit's choosing and ask yourself, might the Spirit be at work in them trying to teach you something new?

Think of someone whom our society is quick to dismiss and anxious to deport and ask yourself, might the Spirit be at work in them to refresh the stale air we breathe?

Think of someone you least like because of the way they challenge your thinking and ask yourself, might the Spirit be at work in them to bring new life to places that have grown tired, including ourselves?

Now, don't misunderstand me. This is difficult for me too.

At the preaching conference I just came back from, there were a lot of new and young faces. A whole new generation of Pastors. One of the organizers of the event said, “Oh, isn’t this wonderful! So many young and new faces, fresh with great ideas and thoughts!” The whole auditorium of over 1800 people stood up and clapped.

Want to know how I felt? Well, not very good. I’m fifty-eight years old and in my 30th year of ministry. Over the 25 years this conference has taken place, I’ve missed maybe three or four of them. Most of the folks at this conference were first timers.

As I stood there amid this applause, I couldn’t help but feel a bit left out. Is the Spirit done with me? I wondered. Does what I’ve learned and experienced over these 30 years of challenging ministry have any worth?

I’m ashamed to admit it but I felt a little like Joshua complaining to Moses. ‘We just can’t have this! Where’s the clapping for the ones who’ve suffered through the long race and remained faithful?’

The Spirit is challenging and a big part of that challenge is learning how to be pliable and open to that Spirit when it begins to blow. By its very definition, the wind is always on the move and, as part of that, the wind is always expanding the boundaries of the church. It’s constantly pushing against our comfort zones. It’s always drawing new people into our midst, changing the dynamic of who we are. It likes to keep us on our toes; to push us to see things in a new way as it blows new life into our tired places. And, as the wise and thoughtful Moses had learned, it’s a good thing. A thing to stand up and applaud.

Before I quit, though, one closing thought about us long timers. Note that when God took the Spirit from Moses it was not a total Spiritectomy. God shared SOME of the Spirit from Moses, meaning that some of the Spirit remained with Moses. Yes, the Spirit blessed words and wisdom of Moses were not diminished by this transplant. In fact, I think wise old Moses had learned over the years that when the Spirit lights a candle from another candle, it does not lessen the light of the first candle. No, it just causes the light to spread, making all of creation a brighter, better place.

‘Oh, would that God put his Spirit on all his people.’

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.