

*One of the Seventy; One of the Two*

Pentecost

June 4, 2017

Gordon Wiersma

Text: Numbers 11:24-29

Introduction to Old Testament Lesson – Numbers 11:24-29

I'm going to focus on this passage for the sermon. It's one of the alternative texts for Pentecost Sunday, and not one used very often. And in fact it's one of those stories that I hadn't remembered was there in the Bible at all – so I found it quite intriguing and even delightful to come across. It is from the Book of Numbers which is mostly a collection of census numbers about the people of Israel as they settle in the Promised Land, so not the most engaging kind of stuff to read. But then comes along a story like this one, which tells us of an incident with Moses, the leader of the Israelites, and with some of the other leaders, the Elders, of the people. One other thing about this passage, is that I am making a point to ask Lena and Dylan to pay close attention (not that you wouldn't otherwise 😊) because I'm going to be addressing my sermon to particularly to you this morning, and inviting everyone else to listen in. I know you'd rather not have me call attention to you, but that's the way it is today as we celebrate you making Profession of Faith – I know it's tough having a church family that loves and celebrates and is proud of you! So here's the story from Numbers 11.

So, Lena and Dylan, here goes – but I won't look at you the whole time 😊. As you've spent time in GIFT class over the last couple of years, part of what I've tried to share with you is a love of the Bible as a gift that connects us with God – the Bible as a wonderful and wise and perplexing and life-giving and strange and good book. But part of that gratitude also means that we're willing to ask challenging questions about the Bible. So that when we come across a great story like this one about Moses and the Elders of Israel, it's also important to notice things around it that are difficult. For example: just before this story God promises food for

the people in the wilderness, but God also gets angry at all of their complaining; just after this story the people receive food, but there is also a plague that is described as a punishment from God. And then in this story itself, did you notice that all of the Elders in this story, are men? I would hope that you have some righteous indignation about that - the exclusion of women from leadership is not what faith in God is about. Those are the kinds of questions and critiques to bring to the Bible. Part of faith is having questions – and not just expecting answers from pastors or parents, but to be a part of a community where it is OK to live with those questions. And when you do that, the Spirit of God will guide you, not with all the answers, but with faith and wisdom to live with love and courage.

So it's important to see some of the challenging things around and in this story, but then also we can listen to and enjoy this wonderful story – here's how it goes:

God has brought the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt with Moses leading the way. This is great, but it's not easy and one challenge along the way is food. The people are hungry - God promises to provide. But then right in the midst of this food crisis comes this story - which isn't about food at all, but about the word of God and the Spirit of God. Interesting. Perhaps a story about a different kind of nourishment that they also need.

God has promised to Moses that God's word and presence will be with the people. And in this story, we're told that the Spirit of God rests on the Elders of the people. The Spirit of God is given to the Elders so that they prophesy, which means that they speak in a way that is very in tune with God's will and way. There are 72 Elders – and 70 of them go to a special place of worship where they prophesy in the Spirit of God. This is all good.

But there are 2 other Elders, named Eldad and Medad (I like that we're told their names!). They don't go out to the worship tent – it doesn't say why, it just says that they are back in the main camp – and the Spirit of God rests on them too, and they prophesy. Now that might seem good to us, but in the story, this causes a crisis. Someone notices these 2 rogue elders, and runs to tell Moses. And when this news is heard, Joshua, assistant to Moses, wants Moses to tell these 2 stop – and Joshua really does sound like a little kid tattling on his siblings:

“Moses, those 2 aren’t following the prophecy rules! – make them stop!” So why are Joshua and the 70 upset? Well, it seems that they don’t like those 2 being on their own away from the 70; seems they don’t like those 2 being in the regular camp rather than at the holy place. Eldad and Medad were not doing things the approved way. So what will Moses do? Well, much to the chagrin of Joshua and the 70, Moses says not only that what these 2 are doing is OK, but that it is good. ‘I wish’, says Moses, ‘that the Spirit of God was on all people. I wish that all the people were prophets.’ That’s the story – then it’s back to the food crisis.

This is Pentecost Sunday, the day we celebrate the Holy Spirit given to everyone in the church. Which means this is a day that we celebrate the wish of Moses come true: because to be a part of the Church is to claim the promise that the Spirit of God is with you to do God’s work. And that means that you are a prophet: God’s Spirit is in you to speak and do things that show God’s ways for yourself and others. I think that Moses in the heavenly presence of God really likes Pentecost Sunday. And as we celebrate the Pentecost story of about 2000 years ago, I think it connects that story from Numbers of about 4000 years ago very much to you right now in 2017. Because as you profess your faith that the Spirit of Christ is with you - as you recognize that you are in your own way a prophet - what it brings up is the challenge of the 70 and of the 2.

Sometimes your faith in Jesus Christ will be like being a part of the 70 – part of the majority – part of what is expected and accepted. That is good – your faith joins you to a much larger group of people, the Church, which we call the body of Christ. You are a part of a large body of people that can encourage you in faith and help to guide you in good choices – what’s expected and accepted by people of faith is often a good thing. It’s like being a part of that group of the 70 prophets– nothing out of the ordinary – just good. That’s an important part of your faith.

And sometimes your faith in Jesus Christ will be like being part of the 2 – a part of the minority – a part of what is not expected and not accepted. That is good too. Sometimes faith in God means being different than the majority out there in the world; and sometimes that also

means being different than the majority in the church. And knowing that about yourself can help you to listen to others when they say what sounds different too – to listen to different voices. Sometimes faith in Christ is being like one of the 2 prophets - Eldad and Medad – being out of the ordinary.

The 70 and the 2: both are good – both are needed, being in the majority and being in the minority. Both are both a part of faith in Christ, part of being a prophet with the Holy Spirit at work in you. They're both good, but being one of the 2 is harder. Going against the grain always takes a bit more effort and energy and courage. And there are times that God's Spirit will call you to be part of the 2 – times the Spirit will speak in you as part of the minority, whether it is for yourself or for others. And that is hard – and because it is hard, sometimes people, Christians, don't do it. Sometimes they just stick with what is safe, just stick with the 70, because it's easier. And so that is why I want to encourage and challenge you as followers of Jesus Christ, that sometimes faith isn't easy when the Spirit calls you to be part of the 2. But it's important – and it is something the church and world and God needs from you.

A couple of weeks ago now in Portland there was a story of 2 – of 2 people who died for being prophets. There was a man on a train harassing, speaking hate, to some women. It was hate based on race and religion, and the man was threatening these women. There were a lot of people, and it was a difficult situation to know what to do; but then 3 men spoke up to stop this hatred, and 2 of them were killed by that man. The Spirit is at work in this world - not just in Christians, but wherever people give voice to God's love and justice and grace – not just in the approved places like church or with the established groups that we expect - and following the Spirit can be costly. The death of those 2 men is so tragic, but our faith in God understands that cost. We can best honor the love and courage of those men and others like them when we proclaim a faith in God that is willing to stand up, to be a voice that speaks in the face of hatred and violence - the voice of the 2. It is seldom so costly as those 2 in Portland, but in simple ways every day the Spirit will call you.

I think this story does draw us most deeply to think about when God calls us to be a part of the 2, which could seem like a very small number. But to end this sermon I want to do some math with you: think of the ratio of 70 to 2; then think of all the people who are Christians, and divide them into a ratio of 70 to 2; and then think of all the people in the world and divide them into a ratio of 70 to 2. If you do the math, it turns out that being one of the 2 isn't really being just one of 2, it's one of 100s and 1000s and millions: there will always be a community of people to support you when your prophetic voice goes against the grain. You can find that for yourself in the church and in the world, and you can be a support to others. And even more than that, even if it were that you were just one of 2, you would be really one of 3, because the Spirit of Christ is with you – always – and that is a promise that can give you the courage to be who you are: a prophet with a voice from the Spirit of God to speak your faith – as one of the 70, and one of the 2. Thanks be to God. AMEN.