

Mount Olive Lutheran Church  
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The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost  
September 27, 2009 (Proper 21)  
Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29

*"A Measure of the Spirit"*  
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

I have very mixed emotions about preaching this sermon today. Early last week, I was pretty sure that the Old Testament text had some very important applications that needed to be made. Then as the week went on and the meetings and the problems and the concerns with things in the congregation and other matters in the church at large began to pile up and I was getting phone calls at one place reminding me that I needed to be at another, I was not so sure that preaching on it was such a good idea after all. For you see the verse that kept coming back to me was verse 11 where Moses says to the Lord, "Why have you dealt ill with your servant? And why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me?" It could be very easy to be misunderstood in this message. But in looking at the entire text, it was also clear that there is a great deal to be learned from this Word of our Lord as well as the other readings and we would pray that the Lord would give us "A Measure of the Spirit" as we consider this text and allow us to grow in grace and in His Word.

I. Complain, complain, complain!

There is a lot of complaining in this text. The children of Israel are in the wilderness. They are accompanied by the rabble which was probably composed of other people who came out of the disaster that was Egypt following the plagues. The rabble is craving for food. And once again the children of Israel are murmuring against God. They wail about all the good food they are missing out on in Egypt. "Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at." Of course, their memory of Egypt was very selective. They were forgetting about their slavery. And while it was not the first time they would complain, it would not be the last time either. The Lord's reaction was one of anger. The text says his anger blazed hotly. And Moses, the leader of the children of Israel showed his utter frustration as well in the words I quoted in the introduction, Why do "you lay the burden of all this people on me? ... I am not able to carry all this people alone; the burden is too heavy for me." So as we see not only did the children of Israel complain, but Moses complained as well. He would not see a way out from all the pressures and burdens involved in leading such a people.

In the Gospel lesson today, the disciples of Jesus were also complaining, yet interestingly their complaint was the opposite. They were concerned that someone was doing the work of Jesus without his permission, without being one of the group of the chosen disciples, "We saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."

It is easy to complain. It is easy to forget the blessings of God. It is easy to say, "Woe is me?" See, this is why I said it became more difficult to think about this text as the week went on. Because that should not be the attitude of any of us. It is always very easy to feel sorry for ourselves. The actual sorrows of this fallen world and of our lives are enough of a reminder of the need we have for God's help.

## II. A Measure of the Spirit

And it is God's help that is clearly evidenced in the words of our text as well. the Lord heard the cry of Moses for help. He recognized the need for others to share in the work of leading the children of Israel. Our Old Testament lesson relates how the Lord directed the seventy elders to come to the tent of meeting (the Tabernacle) and how He poured out his Spirit upon them. They would share in the work of Moses among the people. And the text also states that two men, Eldad and Medad had remained in the camp and the Spirit rested upon them in the camp and they prophesied. Joshua was disturbed perhaps thinking that these two were attempting to take Moses' place among the people. But Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!"

In a very similar way, Jesus spoke to his disciples in the Gospel lesson for today when they were concerned about the man who was driving out demons in the name of Jesus. "Do not stop him ... no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward." Now I suppose it looks at first glance like Jesus is teaching that our deeds will save us. No, for the deeds are done in his name, for the Christ. They are the fruit of the faith which trusts in our Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. The little things done for the sake of the Gospel, for the sake of the church, for the people of God even like giving someone a cup of water are examples of service for the sake of Christ. As the Apostle Paul writes, "Do good unto all men, especially unto those who are of the household of faith." The service we do does make a difference.

In these accounts there is a good lesson in Christian service. First of all in the formal ministry of the church, the elders of Israel assisted Moses. In the Gospel, Jesus points out that those who work in his name are also part of the solution rather than the problem. It is the work of the Spirit, a measure of the Spirit, which accomplishes all these things. The Holy Spirit is the one who "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith" as the explanation to the Third Article reminds us.

## III. "Prayer Has Great Power"

So we are assured even when the needs of the times seem to overwhelm us that we must rely

on the gifts of the Spirit. But there is one final thought which is present in the Epistle lesson for this day which also is very instructive. St. James speaks of the power and importance of prayer. He speaks of prayer in the formal work of the church and in individual lives. Listen to his words: 13"Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. 14Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. 15And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. 16Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." We turn to the Lord in prayer and he hears our cries. Moses, though frustrated and almost to the breaking point, asked the Lord what he was to do and the Lord provided help. The prayer of the righteous does have great power.

Pastor Struve has stated on more than one occasion recently that he has been overwhelmed by the cards and the prayerful thoughts he has received following his surgery. I have also been heartened by the simple words of many of you when you have said, "I am praying for you, pastor." Thank God for such faithfulness. And there are also the things we do in response to the love of God. The things summarized by the cup of water which Jesus refers to in the Gospel today. The ways in which we live and love and serve can be many. And perhaps you do not know what your service can be. The Lord will lead you as well. We sang before the sermon the words of the spiritual, There is a balm in Gilead. Were you listening to the words as you sang:

Sometimes I feels discouraged  
and think my work's in vain,  
But then the Holy Spirit  
Revives my soul again.

If you cannot preach like Peter,  
If you cannot pray like Paul,  
You can tell the love of Jesus,  
And say He died for all.

Yes, those cups of water can be most refreshing indeed.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.