

PENTECOST 19

Proper 21 - Year B

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Note: During the 2024 Season after Pentecost, Sermons That Work will use Track 2 readings for sermons and Bible studies. Please consult our archives for many additional Track 1 resources from prior years.

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29

⁴The camp followers with them had a strong craving, and the Israelites also wept again and said, "If only we had meat to eat! ⁵We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic, ⁶but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."

¹⁰Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the Lord became very angry, and Moses was displeased. ¹¹So Moses said to the Lord, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? ¹²Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom as a wet nurse carries a nursing child, to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors?' ¹³Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me, saying, 'Give us meat to eat!' ¹⁴I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. ¹⁵If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery."

¹⁶So the Lord said to Moses, "Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting and have them take their place there with you.

²⁴So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord, and he gathered seventy of the elders of the people and placed them all around the tent. ²⁵Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him and took some of the spirit that was on

him and put it on the seventy elders, and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again.

²⁶Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, so they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." ²⁸And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, "My lord Moses, stop them!" ²⁹But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!"

Commentary from Erica Andersen

In today's Old Testament reading, the Hebrews have grown weary of manna and are remembering their time as slaves in Egypt with rose-colored glasses. We have a tendency sometimes to think of the ancient Hebrews as people very different from us, perhaps somehow less enlightened. If we think of them in this way, we completely miss the meaning of the story. The stories of the Hebrews always have something to tell us about human nature. The stories of the Hebrews are always about us.

Our passage from Numbers reminds us of how quickly we tend to forget God's blessings in our own lives, and how tempting it is to think that we somehow know better than God about what is best for us. The Hebrews have chosen to see God's providing manna for them as a punishment rather than a gift.

We also see Moses experiencing burnout. He is thoroughly tired of trying to lead this group of people, and he even begs for God to end his life. Most leaders, be they ministers, managers, or schoolteachers can probably relate, at least to some degree, to Moses' feelings of frustration.

God responds by giving some of Moses' gifts to numerous other elders in the community. Joshua expects Moses to be jealous, but Moses responds with wisdom, humility, and gratitude; he understands God's action as a gift rather than a punishment.

The last line of our passage, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!" can be read by Christians as a foreshadowing of the coming of the Holy Spirit, the gift that God will pour out on Pentecost after Jesus' ascension.

Discussion Questions

Have you ever been in a leadership setting where you have felt at your wits' end with your group? How did you pray about it?

Have there been times when your perspective changed on something, when you realized that something you had thought of as a burden or a trial turned out to be a gift?

Psalm 19:7-14

- ⁷ The law of the Lord is perfect
and revives the soul; *
the testimony of the Lord is sure
and gives wisdom to the innocent.
- ⁸ The statutes of the Lord are just
and rejoice the heart; *
the commandment of the Lord is clear
and gives light to the eyes.
- ⁹ The fear of the Lord is clean
and endures for ever; *
the judgments of the Lord are true
and righteous altogether.
- ¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold,
more than much fine gold, *
sweeter far than honey,
than honey in the comb.
- ¹¹ By them also is your servant enlightened, *
and in keeping them there is great reward.
- ¹² Who can tell how often he offends? *
cleanse me from my secret faults.
- ¹³ Above all, keep your servant from presumptuous
sins;
let them not get dominion over me; *
then shall I be whole and sound,
and innocent of a great offense.
- ¹⁴ Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of
my
heart be acceptable in your sight, *
O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

Commentary from Erica Andersen

In today's portion from Psalm 19, the psalmist encourages us to think of God's law and God's judgment as gifts rather than as burdens. Verse 8 states that "the commandment of the Lord is clear and gives light to the eyes." God's commandments give us hope, clarity, and renewal.

Verse 9 tells us that God's judgments are finer than gold and sweeter than honey. God's justice and mercy are more profound than we can imagine. The more we can grow into that understanding, the more we can look toward God's judgment with anticipation rather than dread. Through a lifetime of relationship with God, we can learn to better trust in God's judgments and take comfort in them.

The psalmist asks for cleansing from both sins that are done by accident ("secret faults") and sins committed intentionally ("presumptuous sins.") There is an awareness in this psalm that it is impossible to follow God's commandments without God's help; only God knows our "secret faults."

Discussion Questions

Can you think of a time in your life when an authority figure has pronounced a judgment that brought peace or resolution to a situation?

James 5:13-20

¹³ Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. ¹⁴ Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up, and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. ¹⁷ Elijah was a human like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸ Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth yielded its harvest.

¹⁹ My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, ²⁰ you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Commentary from Erica Andersen

Today's passage from the Letter of James calls on us to turn toward God, no matter what situation we are in, to pray for help when we are suffering, and to praise God when we are rejoicing.

It goes on to discuss in-depth prayers for healing and the anointing of the sick. This is the primary passage that provides the theological grounds for the rite of healing that we have in our prayer book. Healing of the sick in this passage, as well as in Jesus' ministry, is connected to the forgiveness of sins. God's healing of our physical bodies is a sign that points to an even greater spiritual healing, reconciliation with God through Jesus. The passage assures us that prayer is effective. God uses our prayers. We know that our prayers are not always answered in the way that we hope, but scripture assures us of the power of prayer.

This passage also emphasizes the importance of confessing our sins. Confession in this passage is not a private matter to be done only to God or only to our priest, but something we should do with one another. Confession is a way that we can be open with one another about our struggles. Church should not be a place to pretend to be perfect but a place where people can feel safe enough to share their imperfections and grow together.

Discussion Questions

Does your church have a healing ministry, such as prayers for the sick, laying on of hands, or anointing with oil? What has been your experience with such practices?

How can churches help people to feel safe enough to confess to one another?

Mark 9:38-50

³⁸ John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us.” ³⁹ But Jesus said, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰ Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹ For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

⁴² “If any of you cause one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. ⁴³ If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, ⁴⁸ where their worm never dies and the fire is never quenched.

⁴⁹ “For everyone will be salted with fire. ⁵⁰ Salt is good, but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

Commentary from Erica Andersen

In today’s Gospel passage, a man is using Jesus’ name to cast out demons, and the disciples are offended by these exorcisms that they assume are unauthorized. Jesus is unconcerned and tells the disciples to leave the man alone. Jesus has come for everyone in the world, and like Moses in our Old Testament passage today, Jesus is not jealous when God works through others.

Jesus goes on to tell his disciples to take care with those who are less fortunate than they are. In verse 42, he says, “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.” The “little ones” could be children, but they more generally refer to the poor and those of low status in society. A theme of the Gospels is that those with more have the responsibility to care for those with less. God’s gifts are always meant to be shared.

Jesus continues using strong language in order to capture our attention. He goes on to discuss, using graphic imagery, how sin should be cut off at its root. Thankfully, we are not commanded to literally remove body parts. Instead, we are to avoid or prepare for situations where we are likely to sin. For instance, sometimes neglecting our own needs leads us to strike out with anger at those around us. When we are rested and feeling well, we have better self-control.

Finally, Jesus reminds his disciples that they are to be salt to the world. To do this we must be different from the world, to “be at peace with one another.” We can feel peaceful when we trust that God’s gifts are abundant; there is plenty for everyone.

Discussion Questions

What helps you to find a sense of peace within yourself, so that you can be an instrument of peace in the world?