

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – 09/26/2021

NUMBERS 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; PSALM 19:7-14 JAMES 5:13-20;

MARK 9:38-50

GOOD MORNING:

MOST OF YOU ARE AWARE THAT I AM A “NUMBERS” PERSON, AND HOW THAT RELATES TO TODAY IS ANOTHER FACTOID IN MY LONG LIST – IN THE 11 YEARS I HAVE BEEN PREACHING, I HAVE PREACHED ON THE 18TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTACOST, TWICE, BUT THE LESSONS ARE DIFFERENT!

THE OLD TESTAMENT LESSON IS ECHOING A THEME IN THE GOSPEL PASSAGE; THE READING FROM NUMBERS ALSO FOCUSES ON THE ISSUE OF WHO HAS A LEGITIMATE CLAIM IN LEADERSHIP IN THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH. I ALSO THINK THAT THE LESSON HAS SOME WORDS FROM GOD TO MOSES THAT HE NEEDS TO DELEGATE, IN ORDER TO GET THE JOB DONE – AND THAT HOLDS TRUE FOR ALL OF US – WE SIMPLY CANNOT DO IT ALL, AND SOMETIMES, AS OUR LESSON FROM JAMES SPEAKS, WE NEED TO DELEGATE THROUGH PRAYER. WHEN THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL WERE IN THE WILDERNESS AFTER THEIR LIBERATION FROM CAPTIVITY IN EGYPT, THEY

COMPLAINED ABOUT HAVING ONLY MANNA TO EAT RATHER THAN THE MORE TASTY MEAT, FRUITS, AND VEGETABLES THEY WERE ACCUSTOMED TO IN EGYPT. MOSES GREW WEARY OF THEIR CONSTANT GRUMBLING AND SAID TO THE LORD THAT HE WOULD RATHER DIE THAN CONTINUE TO BEAR THE BURDEN OF LEADING THESE PEOPLE. "I AM NOT ABLE TO CARRY ALL THIS PEOPLE ALONE, FOR THEY ARE TOO HEAVY FOR ME."

THUS THE LORD TOLD MOSES TO SELECT SEVENTY ELDERS OF THE PEOPLE AND BRING THEM TO THE TENT OF MEETING. THERE THE LORD BESTOWED ON THE ELDERS SOME OF THE SPIRIT THAT HAD BEEN GIVEN TO MOSES SO THAT THEY MIGHT SHARE IN THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF LEADING THE PEOPLE, AND "WHEN THE SPIRIT RESTED UPON THEM, THEY PROPHESED, BUT THEY DID NOT DO SO AGAIN."

IN THE MEANTIME, BACK AT THE CAMP, TWO MEN, ELDAD AND MEDAD, WHO WERE NOT AT THE TENT OF MEETING, ALSO BEGAN TO PROPHESEY. WHEN JOSHUA LEARNED OF THIS, HE DEMANDED THAT MOSES STOP THEM FROM

PROPHECYING. MOSES ASKED IF JOSHUA WAS JEALOUS ON HIS BEHALF, AND HE REFUSED TO STOP THEM. HE SAID HE WISHED ALL THE LORD'S PEOPLE WERE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT AND WERE PROPHETS – FOR EACH PROPHECY CAME FROM GOD AND NOT FROM MOSES. HOW WONDERFUL IT WOULD BE FOR ALL GOD'S FAITHFUL FOLLOWERS TO RECEIVE SUCH INSPIRATION AND TO SHARE IN THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF LEADERSHIP IN THE COMMUNITY.

OUR READING FROM JAMES BEGINS WITH “ARE ANY AMONG YOU SUFFERING, OR CHEERFUL, OR SICK.” AND THE ONE ANSWER IS PRAYER. WHEN YOU ARE HAPPY, DON'T YOU JUST FEEL UPLIFTED AND DOESN'T YOUR HEART SING? THAT GLOW OF HAPPINESS CAN BE SEEN BY ALL, AND THOSE AROUND YOU ARE ABLE TO SEE AND FEEL IT TOO. YOUR VERY ESSENCE IS A PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING. I KNOW, NOT JUST BELIEVE, THAT PRAYER IS THE ONLY ANSWER FOR SICK AND SUFFERING. IT IS EASY TO SAY “GOD WILL TAKE CARE OF IT, OR LEAVE IT IN GOD'S HANDS” AND GOD IS ALL KNOWING. FOR ME PERSONALLY, LETTING GO IS EXTREMELY DIFFICULT. I AM CERTAIN THAT

THROUGH PRAYER, NOT ONLY MINE, BUT THE PRAYERS FROM OTHERS IS THE ONLY WAY THAT THOSE OF US AND OUR FAMILIES HAVE SURVIVED THROUGH ALL THE STORMS OF LIFE. WITHOUT PRAYER WE CANNOT GO FORWARD TO HEALING AND STRENGTH. THE PAST 18 MONTHS HAS SEEN PROOF OF THAT.

THIS WHOLE PASSAGE FROM MARK SOUNDS TO ME LIKE EITHER WRY JEWISH HUMOR, OR EXASPERATED MOCKING VIVIDNESS TO SAY TO THE GUYS, “JUST STOP. WE’RE NOT GOING TO TALK ABOUT WHO AMONG YOU IS THE GREATEST. WE’RE NOT GOING TO PUSH OUT PEOPLE WHO DO OUR WORK BUT AREN’T IN OUR GROUP. C’MON, BE AT PEACE WITH ONE ANOTHER.” IF IT GETS OLD AND WEARYING FOR US, IT WAS DISCOURAGING AND VERY OLD FOR JESUS.

REPEATEDLY, THE DISCIPLES WANT TO BE ASSURED THAT THEY ARE IN THE MOST IN-GROUP. AND THAT OTHERS AREN’T. WE KNOW THOSE RELIGIOUS ARGUMENTS. THEY ARE AMONG THE BIGGEST TURN-OFFS TO ANY, EACH, AND ALL RELIGIONS. YOU CAN’T BE AN AUTHENTIC “ONE OF US”

IF YOU EAT MEAT ON FRIDAYS, IF YOU EVER EAT PORK OR SHELLFISH, IF YOU DRINK ALCOHOL, IF YOU DON'T COVER YOUR SHOULDERS OR YOUR HEAD WHEN YOU PRAY, OR IF YOU'RE MARRIED OR – HERE WE MAY EACH PICK OUT OUR OWN FAVORITE RULES OF BEING IN AND, MORE IMPORTANT, RULES OF BEING OUT. WE'VE ALL WANTED GUARANTEES OF BEING IN, ALMOST AS MUCH AS WE'RE EAGER TO HAVE THERE BE GUARANTEES FOR THOSE WHO ARE OUT.

FOR SOME GROUPS, IT MAY BE OK TO PICK GROUPS TO BE IN AND OUT BASED ON SOME NARROW SELECTION CRITERIA – BUT EVERYONE WILL BE SALTED WITH FIRE, SO *BE AT PEACE WITH ONE ANOTHER.*

JESUS HERE GETS PRETTY EXAGGERATED AND EXASPERATED IN THE WORRY OF “WHAT'LL HAPPEN IF ANY OF US TURNS OUT TO BE IN SOMEONE ELSE'S WAY.” WILL WE? SURE. WILL EACH OF US? SURE. WILL ALL OF US? SURE. ARE WE SUPPOSED TO PROTECT OURSELVES FROM THE RISK OF BEING AN OBSTACLE TO A WEAK FOLLOWER, A TIMID BELIEVER TRYING TO BE ON CHRIST'S PATH BY RIPPING OUT AN EYE, OR OFF A HAND OR FOOT OR

WHATEVER? C'MON WE ARE INDEED FORTUNATE THAT THERE ARE NOT ORDER OF SISTERS OF THE ONE-EYED ALL SEER OR HOLY BROTHERS OF THE MOST LAME. ASIDE FROM FOOD REGULATIONS PROHIBITING FOODS THAT ARE A RISK IN A PARTICULAR PLACE, WHAT FOODS GOING IN OR CLOTHES HAVE TO DO WITH DISCIPLESHIP IS STILL UNCLEAR TO ME. I SOMETIMES THINK THAT THE FOOD RULES WERE MADE TO PROTECT PEOPLE AS THEY WERE UNCLEAN, AND THE RULES OF WASHING BEFORE EATING WAS CERTAINLY IMPORTANT. ISN'T THAT A RULE FOR OURSELVES AS WELL AS OUR CHILDREN, AS A HEALTH ISSUE? CONSERVATION AND EATING GREEN AND LOCAL MAKE SENSE TO ME . BUT THESE ARGUMENTS CAN SOON WANDER INTO SILLINESS IF WE THEN CAN'T EAT GRAINS EITHER AND SO MUST EAT SPUN MOONBEAMS OR RAINDROPS. LET'S NOT EVEN GET INTO THE DISCUSSION OF MASKS, CONGREGATING OR THAT I HOPE, THERE SOON WILL COME A TIME WHEN WE CAN HUG EACH OTHER AGAIN!

JESUS IS TALKING ABOUT WHO CAN FOLLOW IN HIS WORK AND HOW THEY'LL DO. EVERYONE IS WELCOME, AND WE'LL

ALL BE LIMITED BY OUR HUMANITY. IF THE WAY OF BEING IN OR OUT IS SHOWN IN COMIC WAYS, AND IF THEY DON'T GET FIERCE OR DANGEROUS, THEN ITS PROBABLY JUST A REFLECTION OF HUMAN NATURE. WHEN THE CONSIDERATIONS OF IN AND OUT CAUSE LIMITS OR PROHIBITIONS ON THE OTHER, THEN THEY'RE RISKY.

JESUS EXAGGERATED IN HIS TAKING ON THIS TOPIC. IT'S NOT EASY IN OUR TIME OR ANY TIME TO TAKE SOME OF THE CONCERNS ABOUT "FITNESS FOR MINISTRY" SERIOUSLY. HERE'S WHAT JESUS LONGS FOR US TO GET TO: THE MINISTRY, THE WORK, THE CALL TO SERVICE FOR OTHERS, COMMUNITY MAKING, AND AIMING FOR THE REALM OF GOD. *SO BE AT PEACE WITH ONE ANOTHER!*

NEXT WEEK, THE CHURCH CELEBRATES THE FEAST DAY OF ST. FRANCIS OF ASSIS. HERE AT ST MATTHEWS WE HAVE A CHAPEL DEDICATED TO HIM, AS WELL AS A STATUTE AS YOU ENTER OUR PATIO. ST. FRANCIS WAS IN HIS LATER YEARS, A MAN OF PEACE. IT IS SAID HE IS THE PATRON SAINT FOR ANIMALS. SOME CHURCHES EVEN CHOOSE TO HAVE A BLESSING OF ANIMALS ON THAT DAY (WE'VE EVEN DONE SO

A TIME OR TWO HERE) IN KEY WEST, THE DAY IS CHOSEN FOR THE BLESSING OF THE FISHING FLEET. I MYSELF HAVE ALWAYS BEEN A KINDRED SPIRIT OF ANIMALS – FOR A SHORT PERIOD OF TIME IN MY LIFE WE HAD A FOREST BEHIND MY HOUSE (OBVIOUSLY NOT KEY WEST) AND I USED TO GO THERE MOST AFTERNOONS. THE ANIMALS BECAME COMFORTABLE WITH MY PRESENCE AND I WITH THEIRS – A PEACEFUL TIME FOR ME. THEN I LEARNED THAT I SHARED THE DAY – THE 4TH OF OCTOBER WITH THIS PATRON SAINT – HE WAS BORN AND DIED ON THIS DAY – I FELT HIS SPECIAL BLESSING –

AS THE CLOSING VERSE IN OUR PSALM SAYS: “LET THE WORDS OF MY MOUTH AND THE MEDITATION OF MY HEART BE ACCEPTABLE IN YOUR SIGHT, O LORD, MY STRENGTH AND MY REDEEMER.”

AMEN.