A Matter of Pride

For me and, I suspect, for many of you, there is an obvious lesson in the combination of these two readings and I’ll come to that in a moment. My initial thought for this week was to preach that easy lesson, skate around the difficult sections of the Gospel reading, and send us all home feeling pretty good about ourselves. Naturally, that’s not what I’m going to do. I do think it’s important for us to take note of where we seem to be living into God’s will and to feel good about that – I’m not a fan of the type of Christian doctrine that says all human beings are totally worthless, never in the least bit worthy of God’s love, needing to cower under God’s wrath, and so on. But I am very aware of the dangers of complacency, of thinking we’ve got it made, that we don’t have to try any longer to live more fully as God would have us live. I know that when I get complacent in that way, I start making mistakes in the way I live, hurting people without meaning to (at least consciously), not living up to my own standards, let alone God’s. Walking in the way of Jesus means, as he taught, a light burden and an easy yoke but it also means, as he also taught, paying attention to the narrowness of the path. It can be all too easy in life to get distracted and to veer into danger.

But let’s start with the easy lesson before we get down into the weeds. The quick connection between the story from Numbers and the story that opens the reading from Mark is the unpredictable action of the Holy Spirit. We have just now lifted our voices in song and given permission, even urged the Holy Spirit to blow where she will. Kind of presumptuous of us, really, even foolish because if the Scriptures affirm one thing about the Holy Spirit it is certainly that “the Spirit bloweth where it listeth,” or if you’d prefer less archaic language, “the Spirit blows where it chooses.”

This is a truth that both Moses and Jesus gladly affirm in our two stories this morning. They understand that the God revealed in the burning bush and in the pillars of fire and cloud, the God whom Jesus called “Abba,” is not bound by human expectations or rules. Their disciples, Joshua in the first story and John in the second, have not yet figured this out. They are still expecting God to conform to their own patterns of inclusion and exclusion. They are proud to be on God’s side and they want pride of place with God.

So, here’s where the easy lesson comes in. It’s the lesson of countless commentaries and sermons available on the internet and I would imagine it’s being taught from many pulpits today. Just as Joshua and John were surprised and offended by the power of God being revealed through persons who were outside of their own group, so Christians are often surprised and offended by the power of God being revealed through persons outside of their own group. In pulpits around the world today, preachers are reminding their congregations that the Holy Spirit is not confined to their church, that the church in the next town or over the border is just as likely to be filled with the Spirit as are they. Pastors are reminding their flocks that Jesus has other flocks too, that the church across the street may have different theology and practice but that Christians all have one Lord. If they are really bold, the women and men preaching from this lectionary this morning may even be lifting up the possibility that the Spirit is moving in the local synagogue or mosque or temple. They are reminding the people that all truth is God’s truth. They are encouraging people to remember that the Spirit, indeed, bloweth where it listeth.

But this is, after all, a very easy lesson for Good Shepherd Baptist Church. You are a people, after all, who are known in the community for your ecumenical cooperations. From the
participation by your pastors and your lay leaders alike in the work of the South Snohomish County Ministerial Association and the Church Council of Greater Seattle to your support of such ecumenical efforts as the Food Pantry, the Angel Tree, Bread for the World, and many, many other worthy projects, you have shown by your deeds that you recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit in women, men, and organizations who are not part of this congregation or our denomination. How many times, I wonder, has an adult education group of this congregation heard with gladness God’s truth as revealed through the understanding of our Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu brothers and sisters? There are not many Baptist churches, I warrant, where one could enter the church building on a Saturday morning, as I did yesterday, and greet the leader of one of the congregations sharing the building by inquiring if he’d passed a blessed Yom Kippur and then greeted their guest preacher for the morning with “As-salaam aleikum.” I don’t think that I need to remind you this morning that, as far as human constructed religious groups go, the Spirit bloweth where it listeth. Well done, Good Shepherd Baptist!

But, as I said last week, we can get into trouble pretty fast by assuming our superiority over the followers of Jesus (or, this week, of Moses) with their seemingly limitless ability to miss the point. That is, after all, a sure sign of spiritual pride rather than of humility, and I’d suggest to you that it is pride that got Joshua, John, and the rest into hot water in these tales. Let me explain what I mean. In both of these stories we see a young man faithfully following a charismatic spiritual leader who has experienced the power of God running through him. In Numbers, it is Joshua, the lieutenant and eventual successor of Moses as the leader of the Children of Israel. After the complaint of Moses to God that he, Moses, does not have enough help in wrangling the fractious group of former slaves in their trek across the desert, God has had Moses choose seventy leaders and then the Holy Spirit has fallen upon them, causing them to prophesy, speaking truths, perhaps, that they did not know that they knew. But then this gift is withdrawn and they cannot repeat the experience. In the Gospel According to Mark, it is John, named in the Gospel named for him as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” He and his fellows, as you may remember from two weeks ago, have just experienced their own failure to exercise the gift of healing previously bestowed on them by the Holy Spirit following the prayer of Jesus. Two young men, proud of their status as chosen, proud of the manifestation of the grace of God through them, suddenly reduced to second-class status by some interlopers.

Now the situation sounds a little more uncomfortably close to home. Which of us, after all, has never been challenged in our pride of place by some newcomer? Who here has younger siblings? Have you, perhaps even recently, caught yourself thinking, “They need to listen to me; I’m the big brother/sister!” Anybody here ever experience the phenomenon of being the established leader of a group of friends or co-workers and suddenly found yourself supplanted by the new kid in town? There’s a good song by the Eagles with that title and theme, by the way. Ever had a more recent employee get a promotion you thought was yours? Or how about this one (it’s deadly): you are engaged in an argument with your offspring only to have them trump your argument with one you know is sounder but you counter with “Because I’m your father and I said so.”

Pride of place is so natural to us as humans but we need to remember that pride must always be tempered with humility and with love. I know that many of you share my deep regard for the admonition given through the prophet Micah: “(God) has told you, O mortal, what is good; and
what does the **Eternal One** require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” One of the problems with dividing the narrative of the Gospels up into bite-sized bits for study or preaching is that we sometimes lose the flow of the narrative. I invite you to think again with me about the lessons from Mark in the last two weeks. In one, we thought about how the disciples were reminded that the healing power of which they were so proud came from God and only from God, not because of any special virtue of their own. In the next, we considered Jesus’ lifting up of a tiny child as the honored representative of the Creator of All Things. It is in humility that we can fulfill the pride of God. It is in weakness that we see the strength of God. Love that is modeled after God’s love, as Paul famously wrote to the Corinthians, is not envious or boastful or resentful, does not insist on having its own way. In other words, to borrow from yet another great Seventies pop song, “Love has no pride.”

I think, and I was encouraged in this by the musings of my colleagues on Wednesday morning, that it is pride that Jesus is warning the disciples against in those rather bizarre words that are so often taken out of context in Mark 9:43-48. To begin with, it makes no sense at all for Jesus the Healer to advocate for literal maiming and disfigurement. Clearly, his admonition to rid oneself of hand, foot, or eye is metaphorical. Most folks would tell you that he is talking about the importance of eliminating sin from life. But is he talking about just any sin or are these verses more a piece of the whole? When we take into consideration what I would have called in my acting days the “spine” of the “scene,” we see that Jesus is dealing with the pride of his followers; first, in the reminder to them that they must pray and rely on God in healing, then in the redirection of their squabble over priority in the Kingdom to the vulnerability of the child and, finally, in his reminder that his message is inclusive rather than exclusive. The motto of the Beloved Community is not, as a U.S. President admonished the world just a few years ago, “You are either with us or against us,” but rather, “Whoever is not against us is for us.” Pride that excludes, demeans, or assumes is indeed one of the deadly sins.

In the brief time I had to read commentaries and articles on these passages this week, I found one by Dennis Hamm that I really liked. Dr. Hamm is professor of New Testament at Creighton University and, not surprisingly in that Jesuit institution, a priest in the Society of Jesus. He writes: “Jesus’ teaching… turns from the complaint to the complainer, the petulant Joshua or John within us all, as if to say, ‘If you want to practice some decisive exclusion, attend to yourself. Instead of cutting people out of the action, maybe you have some personal cutting to attend to.’” Hamm goes on in his brief article to write of how we must “be decisive, even radical, in (our) choices, when it comes to (our) journey toward the reign of God.” We must, in other words, be alert for those things which separate us from God and be ruthless about eliminating them from our lives. For me and perhaps for some of you, pride is indeed a besetting sin and one which has often caused me to act toward my sisters and brothers with less compassion than I should exhibit. I have not always been as “inclusive” as I should have been. I have not always opened my heart, mind, and arms with humility. Again, as Dennis Hamm writes: “we are challenged to be inclusive with regard to people we perceive as encroaching “outsiders” (be brother to the other; sister to the visitor). At the same time, we are encouraged to take some of our instinct for decisive exclusion and address it to aspects of our lives that may need that kind of radical surgery if our life with God is to be preserved and enhanced.”
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It is the move toward spiritual humility and awareness of our shortcomings that gives me a clue to at least one understanding of Jesus’ rather cryptic words about salt and fire. Once again, I am given pause by the double use in scripture of the image of fire. It can be an image of destruction or of purification, healing, and new life. I think here, it is both. Jesus has just spoken of the fire of destruction into which the negative parts of our lives, including sin, should be consigned. But we are also dealing here with a story of the movement of the Holy Spirit; the Divine Fire, if you will. To be salted with fire, then, may very well mean that it is in the casting off of pride and other negative influences that we are preserved and made a part of the life-giving force that the world craves, just as salt preserves and is essential to life. But I think Jesus is also referring to the way that the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives sanctifies those places where sin has dwelt, turns our mistakes into places of growth and connection with grace.

Jesus tells his disciples that they are to have salt in themselves and to be at peace with one another. That the two are connected helps round out the image of salt here. Saltiness is the attribute that allows peace to flow. It is the mark of peace, the mark of the touch of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Because the Holy Spirit turns our weaknesses into strengths, our inner salt is our remembrance of that transformation and, therefore, our humility. Humility, in turn, is the key to peace with others. Rather than pride, which separates, we are urged toward humility, which allows us to come together.

This, I think, is the “spine” of this “scene.” Throughout the 9th chapter of Mark, following the transfiguration, Jesus shows his disciples again and again the necessity of spiritual humility in their lives. The lesson is for us, too. When we remember that we are dependent on God for all things, that we are no more and no less than our sisters and brothers in the eyes of God, and that we are called to welcome “the least of these” and to live in peace with all, then we are walking in the way of Jesus. Then we show that we are truly his and part of his Body, the Church. Then we can be a true part of the Shalom circle, blown by the Spirit, brought together in love. Thanks be to God!