

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller
The Eighteenth Sunday After Pentecost
27 September 2015

Scripture readings:

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

Psalms 19:7-14

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

Mark 9:38-50

Apparently Moses needed a 12-step program. He was over-functioning and micro-managing. And God teaches him how to not micro-manage and not to over-function. God, in the lesson from Numbers today, apparently teaches Moses something about a higher power and God's greatness and presence and ability to take care of things. But it's fascinating how when the seventy gather and receive the Holy Spirit, immediately a hierarchy is established. And they came from a hierarchy already because they were already leaders of the people. And the spirit from Moses is by God shared with them and they are ordained to do God's work. Here we have the early beginnings of the priestly class.

I remember a marvelous cartoon about ordination that I saw years ago. Surely it was an Anglican ordination. Everybody was in beautiful vestments, and there was a wife and child of the ordinand so it was a married person. The person was maybe becoming a priest or perhaps even a bishop. I don't know. He was kneeling at the altar and all the clergy had their hands on his head. And in the pew his child tugged on the mother's shirt and says, "*Mommy, what are they doing?*" And the mother replies, "*Oh nothing, dear. They're just removed his spine.*" [laughter] Yeah, that's a tough one, isn't it. Or maybe putting a rod in. I don't know.

There is from early on in the life of the religious community... This is a pre-Christian text with Moses, and we encounter it again with Jesus in his own day with his own people. "*They are casting out demons in your name and they're not even a part of us, and where do they get off doing that and they have power and they're doing something good and it's not creditable to us.*" And everybody gets excited when somebody else does some good instead of appropriating it, perhaps, as an example to follow. A lot of energy is expended in trying to exclude Eldad and Medad and the others who are casting out demons and saying, "*That is our turf. That belongs to us. That power is ours.*"

And you think these are old and embarrassing problems, don't you? It happens here, right now, today, doesn't it? The documents haven't been signed. We are not in agreement with that denomination yet. How can *she* celebrate *here*? Well, how about if we believe that *God* celebrates the sacraments? That these are, in fact, what we proclaim and teach them to be: God's gift to the world and that our job isn't to protect their purity but to publish them and distribute them, to get them out there to those who need them rather than to bar people from them who are in need and would benefit from them.

Where do you suppose the pope is going with his relaxed ideas about excluding people from the sacrament who have been divorced? Do you suppose maybe he reads the scripture he tells everybody else to read? Isn't this an astounding moment in the life of the Church! And our problems are not new ones. They're right here. "*Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him.*" Well, he was successful. So what?

Let's get a grip, folks, on the gospel which in many respects - and I think that's a part of our joy with this current pope - which in many respects is different from the Church, the organization, the structure, the hierarchy and all the rest of it - that the gospel has an existence which is larger than ourselves. The gospel has a reality which is as large as God's love. No matter how big and how admirable any of us is, we are still too small to contain very good or complete ideas about the love of God. This papal visit has shown us that the love of God may have something to do with carrying your own blessed satchel up the stairs to the airplane, using a more fuel-efficient car, really talking to people about real problems, starting your address in the middle of St. Patrick's Cathedral in the middle of New York in the middle of all that is American and Catholic by first, in the same city that experienced September 11th, by first expressing sympathy toward Muslims who had suffered a tragedy at Mecca and then next addressing the priests' sex abuse scandal and then talking to people about the nature of the ministry which should be characterized by joy and hard work, about others, about sharing love even when it may not be convenient or may not come to us naturally. It may be that religion may have something to do with not doing what comes naturally. Well no, doing what comes naturally but learning what natural is before we've been taught our prejudices and hatreds and given our identities and locked into boxes and clapped into churches and put into societies and cultures and politics and put behind boundaries that we then think we need to protect which aren't ours anyway and all of the rest of it. Something to believe about the universal message of God's love for all people and the embarrassing desire on the part of many religious people - among whom we ourselves number - to *own*

that love of God and distribute it at *our* pleasure rather than to understand ourselves as those who are employed full-time to distribute God's love at *God's* pleasure - and God's pleasure never ends in terms of sharing love, nor does it exclude *anybody!*

Friends, this is an extraordinary moment in the life of history in our lives to hear the pope in Rome talk about you and me as objects of God's love even though we are "non-Catholics." Could it be that we are growing up? Could it be that we are at a moment of maturity? Could it be that... We learn slowly because the stuff about Jesus is two thousand years old and I have no idea how old Numbers is, but a long time before Jesus, in the thousands, not hundreds, of years. Could it be that there *has* been an understanding about the religious reality which is that if it is at all about anything, it's about the business of sharing the love of God...period. Everywhere...period. With everyone...period. With those who need it...period. And perhaps especially with those who need it most...period, period, period!

I think that the gospel today must be a banging together of a whole bunch of different texts. It's really weird at the end when it starts talking about salt. Somebody must have said, "*Oh, I have a catalog full of references to salt from old scriptures. Let's just put those all together because they all talk about salt.*" I don't know what that's all about.

This business about cutting off your hands and feet and plucking out your eyes and everything, I really do not encourage you to go mutilate yourself. I don't care what the Bible says. But maybe the Bible is talking about a body, but a different body - the Body of Christ. Could it be the Bible in this text - I have no idea; this is just a guess - that scripture is telling us in the Marcan text today that as the Body of Christ, as the Church, if you are doing the work of the Lord, if you are sharing the love of God, if you are proclaiming that God's love belongs to all people and that means your enemies and Muslims and Mexicans who cross the border even illegally, etc., etc., etc., and somebody doesn't like that and leaves the community that that may be a foot or a hand that cuts itself off or an eye that plucks itself out because the body is doing the business that the body is here to do and if that's unsatisfactory and you can't be a part of that - well, we will continue to function without it. We will hobble. We'd be better with two feet but if we only have one, we'll hobble. We'd be better with two hands but if we've only got one, we'll served with that one. We'd see better with two eyes but if one's been plucked out, we'll do our best at seeing with the other. It's this extraordinary business of believing - and I firmly believe the pope believes - that God's love belongs to everyone, absolutely everyone! And if we do a good job with everyone, those with more will understand the joy of sharing with those with less and those with more may learn that those who apparently have less in some categories have way more. And that people with a lot of money in the end may be very, very poor in some respects. We don't have to look far in terms of the political arena today in this world to see that often wealth is not gracious, wealth is not kind, wealth is not generous necessarily, wealth is not polite, wealth is not pretty in some respects. And those who would be pushed out of the way by brash possession have in their possession a generosity of spirit and kindness and love and spirituality and respect and care and concern for others in the world which makes brash bank accounts look like hell. And so we're all called to humility, and it means that we don't have to worry about micro-managing. We don't have to over-compensate or over-function in terms of sharing God's love. God will supply the meat and the manna and the rest of it. But it's not ours to keep. It is ours to enjoy, to have, to benefit from, to consume. But it's also given to us in full measure to share. And it's all right if we're not the only ones sharing it, and we don't have to be the big honchos who are sharing it in God's name so that you know who you owe gratitude to for this because you have to thank me before you can thank God. Right? Because I'm the missionary.

This is way simpler than we make it. This is all about: You are my people. There is a task to be done, and I will give you the resources to do it. Just do it. And love doing it. It might be hard work but it can be joyful. And being joyful is not the same as having pleasure necessarily. Being joyful means: I have received in full and sufficient measure what I need to live this day - daily bread. I, therefore, have received the ability to share daily bread with others, with *any* others, with *all* others...period. And I have no need to be jealous about what anyone else does in the name of the Lord, ordained or unordained, rules of the Church notwithstanding, that it really is important perhaps and not just symbolic, but important to carry our own satchel, to kiss clubbed feet, to hug children, to understand the divorced, the downtrodden, the immigrant, the poor, the excluded, our brothers and sisters. And maybe even some day we will learn to speak Algonquin. *[laughter]*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.