

Pentecost 21B
Peace, Seattle
September 27, 2015
Numbers 11:4-29, Mark 7:24-37

LETTING GOD BE GOD

It's been a memorable week for Seattle and for our country.

High profile visits by two of the world's leading figures— Pope Francis and President Xi— found us riveted to radio and screen. Speeches were given, promises made, and visions cast, which have the potential to reshape economic, political, and spiritual futures.

It's hard to imagine a week that could exceed this last one for its high-powered symbolism of where the world is at and where it might be heading.

All this, and then on Thursday morning, the devastating accident on the Aurora Bridge that has left families on three continents—and us with them—grieving and searching for answers.¹

These aren't the only events that have touched our world, of course.

The refugee crisis in the Middle East and Europe continues, unabated; a stampede at Islam's holiest shrine Thursday took the lives of over 700 pilgrims making the annual Hajj.

But there's something about these events that, when taken together, say something about the times we're living in, how interconnected and how fragile our lives are—and how resilient the human spirit remains in its yearning for completion, for wholeness, for God.

Let's see if our texts have anything to contribute to that reflection.

Two views seem to govern the first lesson and gospel this morning.

First, they remind us how quickly unity can deteriorate when conflicts and challenges distract us from our primary purpose.

And second, they call us to keep trusting in God's presence with us—and to let God be God.

The original title for the book of NUMBERS was IN THE DESERT; an apt title since it tells the story of a whole generation of God's people struggling through their wilderness experience.

Unlike the idealized portraits of other ancient histories, Numbers gives us a largely unvarnished view of Israel's shadow side—the chronic grumbling and complaining and refusal to keep trusting in the God who liberated them.

In Chapter 11 we find the first case in point.

Two years after their liberation, and after months of dining on a severely limited menu, God's people take to waxing nostalgic about their years under Pharaoh:

OH! IF ONLY WE HAD MEAT TO EAT, LIKE WE DID IN EGYPT! WE REMEMBER THE FISH WE USED TO GET FOR NOTHING, THE CUCUMBERS, THE MELONS, THE LEEKS, THE ONIONS, OH!—THE GARLIC! NOW ALL WE HAVE TO EAT IS THIS STINKING MANNA!

¹ Read about it here: http://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2015/09/28/Death-toll-in-Seattle-Aurora-bridge-duck-boat-crash-rises-to-five/7761443436312/

Never mind that their recollections are pure fantasy—their leader, Moses, feels caught between a rock and a hard place. The complaining is really getting his goat, and he can tell the Lord isn't too pleased either.

Trapped in this squeeze play, Moses lays his frustration on the line:

LORD, WHY HAVE YOU TREATED LIKE THIS, GIVING ME THE BURDEN OF THIS PEOPLE?
DID I CONCEIVE THEM? DID I GIVE THEM BIRTH?
I CAN'T DO THIS ALONE—IT'S TOO MUCH. IF THIS IS THE WAY IT'S GOING TO BE, YOU
MAY AS WELL PUT ME OUT OF MY MISERY RIGHT NOW!

Well, God not only feels his pain, he offers Moses a solution:

GATHER 70 ELDERS WHO ARE GOOD LEADERS, AND MEET ME AT THE TENT, God says.
I'LL TAKE SOME OF THE SPIRIT THAT IS IN YOU AND PUT IT ON THEM SO THE BURDEN
OF LEADING CAN BE SHARED.

And so we learn our first lesson: Our view is limited. God has the big picture.

When we admit to our limits, new solutions can emerge where we thought there were only dead ends.

The 12-step motto puts it this way: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

This first insight leads us to the next: We're not in this alone. Whether it's burden or joy, God wants us to share it together. Trusting God equips us to respond to each other.

In his address before Congress last week, Pope Francis said that, like Moses, the job of lawmakers is to “keep alive [the people's] sense of unity” through just legislation; “to protect, by means of the law, the image and likeness fashioned by God on every human face.”²

Pointing to the Golden Rule, Francis went on:

“This Rule points us in a clear direction. Let us treat others with the same passion and compassion with which we want to be treated. Let us seek for others the same possibilities which we seek for ourselves. Let us help others to grow, as we would like to be helped ourselves. In a word, if we want security, let us give security; if we want life, let us give life; if we want opportunities, let us provide opportunities. The yardstick we use for others will be the yardstick which time will use for us.”³

At the end our first lesson we hear about two guys, Eldad and Medad, who also had received God's spirit of prophesy, though they came by it through a different route than the 70 elders.

Joshua, Moses' young lieutenant, hears about this and he immediately goes, clipboard in hand, to Moses. Eldad's and Medad's names, you see, didn't show at the tent, so he wants Moses to stop them.

But if Moses has learned anything, he's learned not to second guess the spirit of God.

WOULD THAT ALL THE LORD'S PEOPLE HAD GOD'S SPIRIT IN THEM! he tells Joshua.

And this is the third lesson. Letting God be God means being prepared for surprises; being prepared to discover God at work in places and among people whom we least suspect.

² Pope Francis address to Congress, September 24, 2015

³ Ibid.

This is the point where Mark's Gospel picks up the story.

The apostle John tells Jesus. "We were walking down the road and met someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he wasn't one of us."

Maybe John and company were trying to prove their loyalty to Jesus. Maybe they were just guarding their turf. But they got it wrong.

Instead of congratulating them for being good watchdogs, Jesus says:

DON'T STOP HIM; WHOEVER IS NOT AGAINST US IS FOR US.

There's something here about letting God be God: don't bar the gate; don't shut the door. Remain open to new faces, new methods, and new avenues for God to be at work in the world.

Jesus calls us to evaluate our actions and our attitudes with care lest we become the very stumbling blocks that he warns against.

One of the attributes that makes Pope Francis so popular among so many is his humility and his ability to address us in simple human terms. Whether we're part of Washington's DC's elite or a homeless person at a soup kitchen, he tends not to draw lines around humanity and say who's in and who's out, and that's the kind of spiritual leader the world responds to.

Letting God be God means recognizing that we never know whom God will use to bring about mercy and justice in our world.

One of my favorite authors died last week. Phyllis Tickle.⁴

She died in her sleep at 81 after living four months with stage 4 lung cancer.

Tickle had a long career as a scholar in the publishing business, focusing on religion in America. Her pithy observations, the books she authored and the talks she gave, made her one of our nation's leading public intellectuals on all things religious—but she was never stuffy.

Those who knew her best describe her ebullient energy, her ironic sense of humor and her feet-on-the-ground practicality as a woman who, while pursuing her career, simultaneously raised six children with her husband on a Tennessee farm.

Her book THE GREAT EMERGENCE sets our rapidly evolving Christian faith into a larger frame, allowing us to get a balcony view of where this river of faith might be running.⁵

"Christianity isn't going to die!" she exclaimed recently, "It just birthed out a new tributary to the river." "Christianity is reconfiguring, it's almost going through another adolescence. And it's going to come out a better, more mature adult. There's no question about that."⁶

I think her words capture the spirit behind what Jesus is trying to teach us in today's gospel.

Where is liberation taking place? Where are people being freed from the forces that bind hearts and cripple lives? That is where God is at work.

⁴ You can read more about Phyllis Tickle in a wonderful article by David Gibson written four months before her death:

<http://www.religionnews.com/2015/09/22/author-phyllis-tickle-faces-death-just-enjoyed-life-dying-next-career/> Some of the material here comes from this article.

⁵ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008.)

⁶ Ibid.

You could see God's work in the aftermath of Thursday's tragic accident on the Aurora Bridge.

The diversity of the passengers on the bus from North Seattle Community College—so many countries, so many stories—remind us again how small our world is, and how swiftly our lives can intertwine and our grief quicken as we put ourselves in their places and in the places of their families.

Being an agent of grace on that bridge Thursday morning meant helping people out from the wreckage; it meant kneeling beside the injured and dying. No one checked the credentials of those who rendered aid before the first responders arrived. And none of them thought what they were doing was heroic—they were just doing the thing we are all meant to do in the midst of tragic circumstances—help, protect, comfort, save.

Is there suffering? asks the writer of James. **Pray.**
Are their any sick? Gather the community around them.

It's in the midst of tragedies like these that surface differences fall away and we uncover the footings of our common humanity.

So what about us, sisters and brothers? What do we do? How do we respond? How do we live?

We weep with those who weep; we rejoice with those who rejoice.⁷
We gather around those who are sick or troubled or distraught reminding them of God's healing mercies. We seek and extend forgiveness.

And we trust Jesus when he says:

Whoever gives a cup of water in my name will by no means lose the reward.

We trust him when he says:

I will be with you always, even to the end of the age.

We trust him when he says:

Take and eat, this is my body, this is my blood,
given for you and to all for forgiveness, for healing, for life.

Amen.

⁷ Romans 12:15