

Pent 18, Proper 21, Yr B
093012, All Saints
Mary Robert

Whoever is not against us is for us.

In the name of God, the one who creates us, saves us and blesses us. Amen.

In today's lessons, there are two stories with similar themes.

The first is from the Hebrew book of Numbers. Moses and the Israelites have been wandering for sometime since their escape from Egypt, and they are growing tired of the journey. So they begin to complain and to whine about how it would have been better to stay in Egypt as slaves, where they would still have plenty of good food and drink - and why did Moses have to drag them out into this awful place? So Moses hears them complaining and goes to talk to God about it. And Moses begins to whine and complain, too - why are you making this my problem, he whines to God. Did I birth these people? Was it my idea to bring them out here? Why don't you do something to fix this?

So God tells Moses to gather up 70 of the leaders of the Israelites and to bring them to the tent of meeting. God says that he will take some of the burden off of Moses and give that burden to these elders by giving them some of the spirit that is with Moses.

Now, way back in the day, the people thought that God lived in particular places - usually somewhere where God had been encountered, and then an altar had been built there to designate the place as holy. By the time of Moses, the people believed that God was mobile. Moses had received the tablets from God and an ark had been built to house the tablets and the ark went before the people as they walked toward the Promised Land. Then they built what became known as the tent of meeting - an elaborately put together tent where the people could visit God because the ark where God lived was in the tent.

So the 70 are invited to the tent and almost all of them come into the tent at the appointed time. There, God hands out some of God's spirit to the leaders, and they begin to prophesy right there in the tent.

Two of the chosen leaders did not make it to the tent of meeting, though. Eldad and Medad had remained in the camp. But the spirit rested on them anyway and they were able to prophesy, too. This was a shock to some, since God's spirit should have been only contained in the special tent. So someone went running to tell Moses. "Moses, Moses, guess what, Eldad and Medad stayed in the camp...and they're prophesying there!" And Joshua, Moses' right hand guy, said, "Make them stop, Moses!" But Moses says, "Are you jealous because they did this? I'm not going to stop them. Wouldn't it be great if everyone were the Lord's prophets!"

The second story is from Mark's Gospel. A disciple John comes running to Jesus: "Jesus, Jesus, we saw this guy trying to cast out demons in your name and we made him stop, because he wasn't one of us!" Jesus says to them, "Don't stop him! Anyone who is not against us is for us!" And he goes on to tell them not to be a stumbling block for others who believe in him.

Both these lessons are about how we deal with people who don't think or act like we do in regard to matters of faith. In Numbers, the leaders cannot accept the idea that God can be or do something different than how they believe God to be or to act. In Mark, the disciples cannot accept the idea that someone who is not in their group can do something good. Both are about insiders and outsiders - ways of thinking and acting that plagued not only the earliest Biblical characters, but those of us in this century, too.

There is also irony in these two stories as well. As you can see in the chapter and verse listing for the Hebrew scripture, several verses are omitted from the total story. One of them occurs when Moses is whining at God - God tells him that his people will be fed often and fed well, and Moses questions whether God can really make that happen. So God says to him, "Is the Lord's power limited? Now you shall see whether my word will come true for you or not." And, bingo, God distributes the spirit to the 70 - when and where God wants to - and it is no problem at all for God.

And in Mark, when the disciples come running to Jesus to tell him about what they had done to the man casting out demons, remember that in the earlier verses of this chapter they have just failed mightily in their attempts to cast out a demon that had been troubling a boy since his childhood. Their reason for stopping this man who actually *can* cast out demons comes with the incredible explanation that it was "because he was not following us." *Us?*

Jesus made it clear that he and his disciples were not going to be a little clique, working in an isolated corner of life, fenced off from others. He tried to teach the disciples that God's actions are not limited to the forms they were so familiar with. It is a lesson for us as well. We Christians cannot fence ourselves off from others who have different ways of following Jesus or different ways of finding God. The one who is not against us is for us. The one who is not against Jesus is on the side of Christ.

Jesus continues to teach the disciples and us with those troubling sayings about cutting off a foot or a hand or an eye if those parts offend us. Those are metaphors, hyperbole - they are not meant to be taken literally! Is it our hand that offends, or what we are doing with our hands, and how we are using them to further the reign of God? Do our feet offend, or is it the direction in which we are headed? Do our eyes offend, or is it the vision we are following?

What Jesus wants his disciples and us to know is that, as leaders, they and we must 'cut off' our need to control how things go, we must 'cut off' our arrogance, 'cut off' our need for privilege of position. And as we heard in last week's gospel, those who would be first must become servants. These words are not about cutting off people who sin. They are about leaders learning that they are not just responsible for themselves, but for the ones they are leading as well, and for those who aren't in the group yet, but who may be called by God and may be given gifts of service by God. These words are about not putting stumbling blocks in the way of others which might cause them to lose faith. In other words, they are not words about Jesus and me, or Jesus and you, but about Jesus and community.

Jesus' words teach us that religion, Christianity, church is not the preserve of a privileged few. He reminds us that we are to welcome all people who are willing to join the journey of following Christ. It is not up to us who gets called - that is the work of the spirit. Over and over again, Jesus teaches us to include, not exclude. Over and over again, Jesus' life leads us in the WAY to which we are called: to include all, to love our neighbor - all sorts and conditions of them, to feed and clothe, to heal, to be salt, to bring justice and mercy and peace. To love as he loves. Let us go on that journey together.