

## September 27, 2009 – Joe Culumber

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29, James 4:7-12, Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48, Psalm 19:7-14

### Numbers

Some of the rabble among the Israelites are grumbling, which prompts a dialogue between Moses & God. God instructs Moses to gather the elders together in the tent of meeting. God speaks to Moses, takes some of the divine Spirit and distributes it upon the seventy, who in turn “prophesy.”

The narrative from Numbers has a familiar ring to anyone who has attempted to lead God’s people: this “grumbling” by those the writer identifies as the “rabble.”

I tried to compare leading 45 Old Testament students on a reenactment of the Exodus by walking five miles to Durley Camp with Moses leading 600,000 men (plus, women, children and Levites) for 40 years in the Sinai Desert!

Bishop Will Willimon makes this observation:

“What kills pastors is not service to the cause of Christ, for such service carries its own invigoration. What is so destructive is being asked to sacrifice . . . for those whose demanding self-centeredness has become an un-bearable burden upon the pastor” (Calling & Character, p. 113).

By the way, the so-called “rabble” here are not the children of Israel, but the non-Israelite element that came out of Egypt with them. Their complaint is about food, the “manna” in particular, in light of which they recall the fish, cucumbers, watermelon, and leeks of Egypt. Their act of remembering the good old days has one major flaw: they didn’t eat for free in Egypt!

The Numbers account is all about leadership, and Moses’ displeasure is reflected in his peppering of YHWH with a series of questions:

- Why have you treated me so badly?
- Why lay the burden of these people on me?
- Why should I have to play nurse maid to these people?
- Where am I supposed to get meat here in the desert to feed all of them?

By the way, there’s an interesting parallel in Matthew 14 where the disciples tell Jesus, “it’s getting late and we’re in a remote area, send the crowds away so they can get food.” Jesus replies: “YOU give them something to eat!”

Even though it's really an attack on Moses, it is YHWH himself who has the most heated response! While Moses is legitimately "distressed" over the demands of the rabble, God's response is "an intensely burning wrath."

Ultimately, the Spirit falls upon 70 of the elders, who experience a kind of "mini-Pentecost" and "prophecy" – probably something akin to speaking in tongues. Meanwhile, two men (Eldad and Medad) had remained in the camp – and they too caught some of the Spirit and also "prophesied" in an apparently authorized manner. Their prophesying prompted a young man to run to Moses, demanding he "stop them."

Moses responds: "I'd be happy if everyone had the spirit of prophecy I possess – maybe my work would be easier!"

The result is that it temporarily quells what the writer calls the "intense craving, the lust" of the rabble for mere physical stimulation. But the experience apparently has little permanent impact on the larger congregation. Perhaps it is a lesson for those who prize "signs & wonders" above all else.

Mark

John tells Jesus, "we saw someone casting out demons in your name – we tried to stop them, because they weren't part of our group!"

The operative phrase in Mark's text appears to be "in the name:"

-they were casting out demons "in your name"

-no one doing a deed "in my name" will soon be able to speak evil of me.

-whoever gives a cup of water "in my name" will never lose their reward.

James

Summed up in his pointed rhetorical question: "Who are you to judge?"

Psalm 19

This psalm is a long dissertation on the law, the testimony, the statutes, and the commandments of the Lord. We'll come back to Psalm 19 later.

Wesley: "Catholic Spirit"

We would be remiss if we did not reference another collection of "sacred texts," namely the works of John Wesley, specifically Sermon #39 of the "52 Standard Sermons," entitled "Catholic Spirit" a reference not to the Roman Catholic Church – but to the Church "catholic," or "universal."

Wesley's sermon is based on a rather obscure text in 2 Kings:

Jehu: "Is your heart right, as my heart is with you?"

Jehonadab: "It is."

Jehu: "Give me your hand."

Wesley's point: good people may entertain peculiar opinions, but because of our flawed humanity no one can be assured that their opinions are the last word. Thus, advises Wesley, when it comes to such matters as worship styles, modes of baptism, and forms of church government, we must show charity.

## SUMMARY

So what are we to do with this collection of texts?

Were we to apply these exhortation categorically, we would have to suspend all judgment regarding truth vs. error, justice vs. injustice, and morality vs. immorality. We live in a time where "Tolerance" has seemingly been elevated to the level of the supreme virtue. We are increasingly tempted to sacrifice "truth" in the service of tolerance.

But a further examination of the texts and contexts in question yields some clarifications.

James' broader perspective.

He warns against the danger of putting ourselves in the place of both lawgiver and judge – when clearly God alone has that prerogative.

But James no sooner issues that warning than he launches into an unparalleled invective – warning us of the miseries which will befall the rich who have profited on the backs of others! "Your gold and silver have rusted and will be used as evidence against you!" he thunders.

Wesley's broader perspective.

His exhortation to a "catholic spirit" concludes with a shopping list of over 40 questions including:

- Do you have faith in the sovereign, crucified Jesus?
- Do you love God with all heart, soul, strength, and mind?
- Do you love your neighbor as yourself?
- Do you show love by your good works?

If you subscribe to all this and more, offers Wesley, then "thy heart is right as my heart is with thy heart!" All this from one known for his stinging polemic against Jews, Mohammedans, Papists, Calvinists and about anyone else who disagreed with him!

Jesus' broader perspective.

We all probably have in mind Jesus' own words from the Sermon on the Mount: "Judge not that you be not judged."

In the passage from Mark where Jesus encourages tolerance for those who are not "part of us," He goes on to warn in the strongest of words those who would place a stumbling-block in the

path of “one of these little ones.” Jesus declares: “You’d be better off if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea!”

And yes, Jesus said “whoever is not against us is for us” – but he also said, “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters abroad” (Mt. 12:30).

What is called for in today’s texts is what R. T. France identifies as a kind of “pastorally responsible criticism” that calls for “a rare degree of self-awareness combined with unselfish concern for others” (Gospel of Matthew, p. 274).

It is what France calls a “reciprocal principle” – the old adage that “people who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones. It is not a prohibition against any use of critical facilities. It calls for correction, not condemnation.

Finally, a few words from Psalm 19 – which remind us quite candidly that God’s judgments trump all others: “The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether” (Psa. 19:9).

With that truth in mind, we should proceed with a 3-fold prayer before judging others:

- “Cleanse me from my secret faults” (vs. 12)
- “keep your servant from presumptuous sins” (vs. 13)
- “let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight” (vs. 14).

Amen.