

**NINETEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | SEPTEMBER 29, 2024**  
**NUMBERS 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29 | PSALM 19:7-14 | JAMES 5:13-20 | MARK 9:38-50**

It's the straw that broke the camel's back. The complaint isn't much by itself. "Why don't we have better food?" But taken together with everything else that's come before, it's too much. Moses, our trustworthy and steadfast leader, finally snaps.

Of course, this isn't the first time the people have voiced this particular criticism. Not long after escaping Egypt, they got into the wilderness and—almost immediately—started complaining about the food. But who could blame them? They were a new people out in the wilderness with an unfamiliar God. There were bound to be some bumps in the road early on.

But at Sinai, these people entered a covenant with God. God promises to be their God and now the people will be a reflection of God's character in the world. They are supposed to be a light among the nations, showing other people what God is like. They are now a changed people who will transform the world around them.

And what has happened since they entered this covenant with God? According to today's reading, nothing. The people are the same. They have not changed. They are not transformed. They are not a light to the nations. And just to drive the point home, they literally complaining about the same stuff they were when they started this journey. No wonder Moses finally breaks down.

We can do difficult things if we know that we're making a difference. Viktor Frankl used to say that if you know why you're doing something, you can figure out the how. If we feel like there's some sense of progress or forward momentum, we can endure the challenges that life throws at us and find a way to keep going.

But now, Moses realizes that he is not making a difference. There is no capital-w Why. Moses has endured physical danger, sleepless nights, emotional turbulence all so these people can grow in their relationship with God. And now he realizes that they haven't grown at all. It's just a waste.

Moses goes to God and laments, "Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me?" In other words, this calling, this vocation, which was meant to be a blessing has turned into a punishment. Moses casts himself as the Job-figure in the story now. What have I done to bring this on myself? How can I possibly keep going if I'm not making any difference?

And God, we're told, is upset, too. When God heard their complaints, "the LORD became very angry." But God comes up with a strange plan. God says that Moses is supposed to get seventy elders together. "Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to [Moses] and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders, and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied."

One way to make sense of this solution is that God is just spreading the leadership out among more people. Moses is burned out and what he needs are some people who can assist him. We need some committees, task forces, and commissions. As Lutherans, we love that. Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, Jesus forms a new committee.

But that's probably not what's going on. Moses already had a circle of trusted leaders like Joshua around him. And, as the authors of Numbers reminds us, after the elders prophesied, "they did not do so again." This is a one-time thing.

Another way to interpret this—and I’m borrowing this from Rabbi Jonathan Sacks—is that the spirit that rested on Moses is spread out among seventy elders not simply as a way to delegate power. But so that Moses can see the difference that he is making in the lives of the God’s people reflected back at him. So that he can experience his own life and ministry the way other people do.

What God is trying to do here is not give Moses a better How. God is giving Moses a better Why. Essentially, God says, *You’re despairing because you think you’re not really making a difference in the lives of these people. So for just a moment, I’m going to give you a glimpse of the difference you’re actually making.*

We don’t get glimpses of that very often. Maybe some here and there—a thoughtful phone call from a friend, a kind word from a stranger—but for the most part, life just sort of goes on. We live, we love, we serve, we get through the day, but it’s difficult to feel like we’re making much progress. Maybe we don’t snap the way Moses does, but we sigh and shake our heads and get back to work hoping that what we’re doing really matters.

When we confess our sin at the beginning of worship, we often ask God to “forgive us our sins, known and unknown.” There are sins that we know we commit. There are things we think about, know they would hurt our neighbors, and say, “Let’s do it anyway.” But there are also unknown sins. Things that we don’t think about. Ways that we negatively affect others unintentionally or unthinkingly.

But here’s the thing. The opposite of that is true, too. There are, of course, lots of good things that we do that we know are good. But there are also good things we do, ways that we love and support our neighbors, ways that we transform the world around us, that we are unknown to us.

Sometimes when life is hard, what we need is not just a way to make life easier. Not just someone else to delegate to. Or a new process. Or a new committee. What we really need is a way to make life richer, to understand the impact that our lives have on the lives of others. That’s the kind of vision that Christ’s Spirit gives all of us in our baptisms. So that we can trust that in ways both known and unknown our lives are a blessing for others.

At the end of today’s story, nothing in Moses’s story has really changed. The people are, presumably, still going to be complaining about the same stuff they were complaining about before. But something important has changed. Noticed the twist at the end of the story. A man runs up to Moses and Joshua, his assistant, and informs them that two men are prophesying in the camp.

Earlier in this story, Moses said that being a prophet was the worst thing that had ever happened to him. Just an endless series of drudgery and complaint and wasted effort. It would be better to die, Moses told God, than to be a prophet. But after seeing the impact of his life on others, something in Moses changes. When Moses hears of people prophesying in the camps, he doesn’t say, “They’re going to regret that.” He responds, “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!” *Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets.*

And thanks to the gift of the Holy Spirit, that’s exactly what we are. God gives the Spirit to us so that we can share the good news, feed the hungry, and transform God’s creation. And God gives the Spirit to others so that when things gets hard, we can trust that in ways known and unknown, seen and unseen, we are still transforming God’s creation.

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