

Pentecost 19, Proper 21B – September 30, 2018  
Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Mark 9:38-50  
St. Giles Church, Northbrook IL – The Rev. Cynthia J. Hallas

Some of my favorite scriptures are those that illustrate that our ancestors in faith were basically just like us. Human foibles and human sin show up in abundance in Numbers and Mark this morning. Two of my favorite characters, Eldad and Medad, also show up today. What I like about this pair is their complete and total willingness to let the Spirit of God speak through them even though it happened in a place where that was considered inappropriate. On God's advice, Moses has taken the seventy elders tapped to assist him in his long-suffering and thankless work of leading the people, and brought them from the camp to the tent of meeting, where God's Spirit rests them. There they prophesy briefly (that is, they interpret and mediate a divine message). Then in runs a tattle-tale, followed by Moses' right-hand man Joshua, complaining that Eldad and Medad, left behind yet still chosen by God, have begun to prophesy in the camp. *In the camp*, among the rabble and the remaining disaffected Israelites. Don't these two know that you can't deliver God's word just anywhere, in front of just anybody? *Moses, make them stop!* Moses response - "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets...." is unexpected. Equally unexpected is Jesus' response to John, when the disciple explains that a person was seen casting out demons in Jesus' name and then was stopped because he wasn't "one of them". What might seem inappropriate is not always so.

This has been a rough week on the national front, although the bad news, ugly behavior, and meanness of spirit on display all seem to predominate with increasing frequency, in politics, in the news cycles, and in social media, to name just a few platforms. So I'm not sure if what's happened this week in Washington has been any more ugly and mean-spirited than what we are, sadly, getting used to, but it does, at least to me, feel more focused, more pointed. Or maybe I'm just getting more and more weary of it. I have grieved to note the number of colleagues and friends, predominantly but not exclusive female, who have reported that the Supreme Court confirmation hearings have brought back very painful memories of events in their own pasts. My preaching colleagues and I have been sharing our thoughts, frustrations, and yes, our fears about whether and how to speak of such things. It's abundantly clear that many of us really aren't at all sure what to say; but all of us are pretty sure that we need to say something, in spite of the notion that any mention of *politics* from the pulpit is inappropriate.

To be clear: I'm not talking about partisan politics, about standing in the pulpit and telling congregants whom to vote for or which political party to embrace or which candidates to believe – though there are clergy who do that, I suppose. It may be helpful to examine the true meaning of the word *politics*, which has to do with the *city* (in Greek, *πολις*) and its *citizens*, people and communities: the welfare of *all*, the *common* good – the very public "camp", if you will. In that sense the gospel and the Torah are both very much political – they call God's people to right and righteous behavior, to compassion and generosity, especially to those without privilege and advantage. We preachers have a responsibility to proclaim that message from our sacred scripture, especially as they speak to us in difficult, disturbing times, and to encourage all of us to live according to the teachings of our faith tradition. And we have a duty to call out evil just as Jesus did; just as the prophets did. This last is especially difficult, when it seems the public perception of what evil is and who's engaging in it are situational and relative.

But here's what I know, and what I believe, based on our scriptures and our baptismal covenant: the human behavior that we continue to witness, not just over this past week but for a number of years, is weakening, perhaps even destroying, the common good; it's uncommonly tragic and poisonous. I believe Jesus would call it evil. And the gospel is clear: when Jesus saw such things happening in his own time and place – in government, in society, and especially in religion – he called out those who were responsible, and called on them to repent and change. Moses, reluctant leader that he was, did the same - with Pharaoh and with his own people. Our baptismal promises, which we renew with regularity, call on us to “seek and serve Christ in all persons” and to “respect the dignity of every human being”. When a particular culture in society is toxic and damaging to others in that society, we who follow Jesus are called not just to denounce it, but work to eliminate it. When ridicule and insult and threats of violence replace civil discourse and thoughtful debate, we who follow Jesus are called to be and to bring the peace of God and a Christlike and Mosaic generosity of spirit into the public arena. When we fear the consequences of being more publicly faithful, we who follow Jesus are called to remember the example of the stranger casting out demons in Jesus' name, and of good ol' Eldad and Medad, prophesying - in the camp.