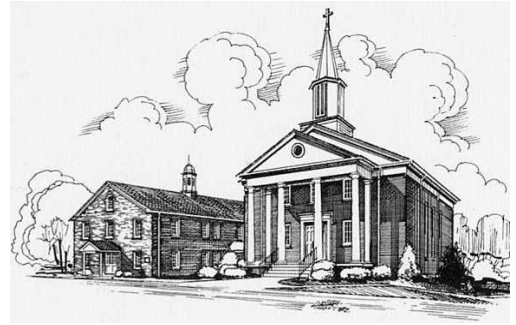


Sunday closest to September 28

Proper 21

Year B

RCL



Numbers 11:4-6,10-16,24-29

Psalm 19:7-14

Mark 9:38-50

The Collect

O God, you declare your almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Grant us the fullness of your grace, that we, running to obtain your promises, may become partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Numbers 11:4-6,10-16,24-29

The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.”

Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the Lord became very angry, and Moses was displeased. So Moses said to the Lord, “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? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom,

as a nurse carries a sucking child,' to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery.”

So the Lord said to Moses, “Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting, and have them take their place there with you.

So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent. Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, 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. But they did not do so again.

Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.” And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, “My lord Moses, stop them!” But Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!”

Psalm 19:7-14

Caeli enarrant

- 7 The law of the LORD is perfect
and revives the soul; *
the testimony of the LORD is sure
and gives wisdom to the innocent.
- 8 The statutes of the LORD are just
and rejoice the heart; *
the commandment of the LORD is clear
and gives light to the eyes.
- 9 The fear of the LORD is clean
and endures for ever; *
the judgments of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.
- 10 More to be desired are they than gold,
more than much fine gold, *
sweeter far than honey,
than honey in the comb.
- 11 By them also is your servant enlightened, *
and in keeping them there is great reward.
- 12 Who can tell how often he offends? *

cleanse me from my secret faults.

13 Above all, keep your servant from presumptuous sins;

let them not get dominion over me; *
then shall I be whole and sound,
and innocent of a great offense.

14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, *

O LORD, my strength and my redeemer.

Mark 9:38-50

John said to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.

“If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell, to the

unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.

“For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

SERMON

Onions and salt – what a peculiar name for a sermon! It’s my way of stirring up your curiosity about the uncomfortable demands placed upon those who seek to follow the example and teaching of Christ. I think we may have allowed ourselves to become a little too comfortable about the serious and frightening business of being a Christian.

As Jean reminds the children each Sunday, we’re practicing to be good Christians, but if we are honest about it, we must confess that we’d also like to do that in agreeable and comfortable settings, yet even a quick glance at Jesus’ curriculum vitae shows that the path of a Christian is not going to be a comfortable one. I think we avoid considering the implications of taking on the name “Christian” by equating comfort with righteousness. The thinking goes that if our lives are comfortable

that surely must mean that God is pleased with us. Conversely, those whose lives are not comfortable must be suffering because they have stubbornly refused God's grace. That's a toxic thought if ever there was one, however popular it has been historically. It's also quite wrong. To equate comfort with God's blessings and suffering with God's displeasure is a sin against the life and death of Jesus who was righteous but lived anything but an untroubled and comfortable life. I would suggest that the path God sets us upon is more gravel road than feather bed. Suffering and discomfort are a part of the true path and, surprisingly, are a blessing as I hope to show you.

Let's begin with the onions. The children of Israel, oppressed and suffering under Pharaoh, left Egypt to walk the path that God decreed for them. They had Moses to lead them, manna to sustain them, the pres-

ence of God to direct them and were provisioned to move God's story in the way it must go. But...

The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."

They were uncomfortable. The menu did not appeal to them. They had what they needed but not what they wanted and that colored their judgment just as it does today when we get too comfortable with our blessings. They wanted fish and garlic for nothing! They had cravings for things other than the path God had set before them. Oh brother! Doesn't that sound familiar? The contemporary media is all about the need for safety and security so that we can eat our melons and cucumbers in safety. What we don't hear is calls for individual sacri-

fice. What if my friend Mike and his bride had said, “Oh! China is too far!” when God called them as missionaries? He did and they went. Church, the path God has for you isn't always comfortable, but it's also not negotiable. You are the hands of Jesus in the world. As I've told you many times in the past, you were created for a purpose, and to discover and be faithful to that purpose is the path set for you. God's plans are greater than your knowledge and include people unknown to you. It is not for you to jealously claim God's righteousness for yourself by offering your comfort as evidence that God favors you.

Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in

the camp.” And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, “My lord Moses, stop them!” But Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!”

Or, in Mark's Gospel,

John said to Jesus, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.

God knows His purposes, and they involve more than just you. As Moses said, “Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them.” You cannot claim God's purposes as your own.

Very often, as well, the sacrifice we are called to terri-

fies us and causes us to throw up our hands, as if we know better than God what we can accomplish for Him. Even Moses lost his courage.

Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the Lord became very angry, and Moses was displeased. So Moses said to the Lord, “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? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,’ to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me.

Moses! God knows your capacity! That's why He chose you for your purpose, just as he knows the capacity of each of us and chooses us accordingly. God is not

going to call you to a purpose to which you are not fit, and He will not leave you without the resources you need to complete your purpose. Our very human sin is to fail to be aware that God has your back in pursuit of His ways. Instead, we must confess that an awful lot of our time and effort is spent in pursuit of our personal comfort. That's a distraction. Pursuit of fish and garlic is effort spent at the expense of our called purpose.

So, what about salt? Here, things get subtle. When we think of salt, we think of potato chips. When a Newfoundlander thinks of salt, he thinks of salt cod. Salt has a seasoning function, and you are called to bring the seasoning of God's way to the world, but salt also preserves. The wounds you suffer in pursuit of your purpose are the salt that will preserve and save you in pursuit of your purpose. Such wounds are a blessing, as I

said. They are how we develop the toughness we need for the purposes to which God has called us. It is in struggle and sacrifice that God makes us over to become what God created us to be. Nobody ever said that was going to be easy. The trials, the struggles you experience in pursuit of God's way are like the workouts of an athlete. Yes! They hurt! Yes! They are hard! But they work to preserve you in the same way salt is used to preserve food.

“For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

God directs us to a wilderness. We believe we haven't the resources to meaningfully serve God, or that it's someone else's responsibility, or that we prefer our own comfort. God promises that the wounds and sacrifice you experience will strengthen you for your purpose.

Who do you believe?

“The world is, to a degree at least, the way we imagine it. When we think it to be godless and soulless, it becomes for us precisely that. And we ourselves are then made over into the image of godless and soulless selves. If we want to be made over into the image of God—to become what God created us to be—then we need to purge our souls of materialism and of other worldviews that block us from realizing the life God so eagerly wants us to have.¹

Can we live into the world God offers us, or must we insist on eating our melons in a comfortable, undemanding world as we imagine it to be?

AMEN

¹ Walter Wink

BENEDICTION

So, I needed two examples: one of a life lived in pursuit of onions and another of a life empowered by salt. The contemporary press provided me what I needed for the first. Bill Cosby was once hailed as America's dad. What a wonderful pulpit. He blew it all on garlic and onions.

What of a Christ-like life? On our way to Panera last Sunday, it was raining. As I got out of the car, I saw an elderly woman in a powered scooter making her slow way to the door. By her side, his speed limited by the speed of her scooter, was her equally elderly husband, holding an umbrella over her head to keep her dry while he got soaked.

Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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