

Sermon for Sept 26, 2021

Gospel: Mark 9:38-50

38 John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." 39 But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. 40 For the one who is not against us is for us. 41 For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.

42 "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin,^[b] it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. 43 And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell,^[c] to the unquenchable fire.^[d] 45 And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. 47 And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 48 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.' 49 For everyone will be salted with fire.^[e] 50 Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another."

Our Old Testament lesson (Numbers 11:4–6, 10–16, 24–29) begins with four verses NOT included in our readings today, but I want to include them because CONTEXT is important.

11 Now the people complained about their hardships in the hearing of the Lord, and when he heard them his anger was aroused. Then fire from the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp. When the people cried out to Moses, he prayed to the Lord and the

fire died down. So that place was called Taberah, because fire from the Lord had burned among them.

Let me remind you of the story of the bronze snake set upon the pole. The people were complaining THEN too... And God sent fiery serpents among them. And once again, they repent and ask Moses to intervene for them and ask God to remove the snakes. He doesn't, by the way, he merely gives them a way to live with the problem. Hence, the snake set upon the pole, "For whosoever is bitten, may look upon the [cross] and live."

The point is... this happens a lot with God's people, the complaining against God and His provision. This is also in the context of our Lord's words. "You have not, because you ask not. And when you do ask, you do not ask with a right heart." So this brings us to our lessons today, the theme of which I think we could sum up as "We're all in this together." And the advantage of being unified and cooperative and keeping a positive attitude as we are God's redeemed people. So let's look at the verses that ARE included in our reading...

4 *The **rabble** with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing...*

Let's stop right there. Our text refers to "The rabble" among them... Who are they? It doesn't seem like a very flattering description of God's people, to segment off a group and call them "The Rabble" among them. But it appears to be the "COMPLAINERS"... Not all of the people, but a smaller group among them who are never content with anything and always stand ready to belly-ache about whatever displeases them.

The scripture refers to them as "*the rabble*" but the phrase in Hebrew is a lot more nuanced than merely "rabble" in English. It's not a bad translation, it's just not a great translation. Some English translations try harder, and refer to them as "*The promiscuous assemblage*." Which is a clunky translation to be sure, but it gets a lot closer to the insult this description actually lays down on this segment of the population. We tend to use the word promiscuous with sexual overtones, but that's not correct either. It really means something closer to *indiscriminate*. What the writer of the text is telling us is that this is a small group of the NOT very discriminating people... these people are NOT thoughtful, they are LACK perspective, they CANNOT see the big picture, because they don't give a fig

about the big picture. Their outlook on life and their concern for it stops at the end of their own noses.

They are the great unwashed, the lowest common denominator; they care for no one but their own selves. They are “The Rabble” among them. Those who *only* think of themselves, and who either cannot, or will not, concede to the needs of others. They are people who react emotionally to difficulties, as we see here. They continually wail and cry and weep and stamp their feet and in general simply throw a grand tantrum. These are those who are unable to be reasoned with, or to have a rational conversation with, and will not be placated.

and said, “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!”

Given the description of this group of complainers as the Rabble among them, this particular scene reminds me of a conversation between the pirates and Long John Silver, in the book *Treasure Island*. The scene takes place aboard the *Hispaniola*, while Jim Hawkins is hiding in the apple barrel and overhears the pirates planning to take over the ship and kill all the good guys...

“I've had a'most enough o' Cap'n Smollett; he's hazed me long enough, by thunder! I want to go into that cabin, I do. I want their pickles and wines, and that.”

“Israel,” said Silver, “your head ain't much account, nor ever was. But you're able to hear, I reckon; leastways, your ears is big enough. Now, here's what I say: you'll berth forward, and you'll live hard, and you'll speak soft, and you'll keep sober till I give the word; and you may lay to that, my son.” “Well, I don't say no, do I?” growled the coxswain. “What I say is, when? That's what I say.” “When! By the powers!” cried Silver. “Well now, if you want to know, I'll tell you when. The last moment I can manage, and that's when. Here's a first-rate seaman, Cap'n Smollett, sails the blessed ship for us. Here's this squire and doctor with a map and such--I don't know where it is, do I? No more do you. Well then, I'd have Cap'n Smollett navigate us half-way back again before I struck.”

“Why, we're all seamen aboard here, I should think. We can steer a course, but who's to set one? That's what all you gentlemen split on, first and last. If I had my way, I'd have Cap'n Smollett work us back into the trades at least; then we'd have no blessed miscalculations and a spoonful of water a day. But I know the sort you are. We'll finish with 'em at the island, as soon's the blunt's on board, and a pity it is. But you're never happy till you're drunk. Split my sides, I've a sick heart to sail with the likes of you!”

“Easy all, Long John,” cried Israel. “Who's a-crossin' of you?”

“Why, how many tall ships, think ye, now, have I seen laid aboard? And how many brisk lads drying in the sun at Execution Dock?” cried Silver. “And all for this same hurry and hurry and hurry. You hear me? I seen a thing or two at sea, I have. If you would on'y lay your course, and a p'int to windward, you would ride in carriages, you would. But not you! I know you. You'll have your mouthful of rum tomorrow, and go hang.”

Did you notice how Israel's complaint, about wanting their pickles and wines NOW? How he didn't want to wait, but wanted to attack now, even before they had the map and the treasure was found and safe on board. All he could think about was what he was missing out on RIGHT NOW... pickles and wine.

But see how that complaint was directed at Long John, that Long John was taking too long to give them what they wanted... The pirate rabble pushing on him, and pushing on him... and what does Long John do? He finally explodes and unloads on Israel. Israel's emotional anxiety is directed at Long John and Long John picks it up. He might be saying very rational things about why waiting is the best course of action, but his emotions are affected by the cravings of the rabble among them.

And we see this play out in our Old Testament lesson as well...

Manna again? When can we have the "pickles and wines," like we used to eat in Egypt! Yeah, for sure, things were way better in Egypt.

10 *Moses heard the people of every family wailing at the entrance to their tents. The Lord became exceedingly angry, and Moses was troubled. ¹¹ He asked the Lord, "Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? ¹² Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors? ¹³ Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, 'Give us meat to eat!' ¹⁴ I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. ¹⁵ If this is how you are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me—if I have found favor in your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin."*

Moses does something I think we can all identify with, when we are in a stressful situation... he goes and complains to a third person, someone he believes has the ability to help him. The relationship between Moses and the people has become emotionally unstable and filled with anxiety.

When a relationship between two parties becomes unstable, we will often enlist a third party to help stabilize the relationship. Like a table or chair needs at least

three legs to be stable, a broken relationship between two parties will often attempt to pull in a third in order to become stable again. Naturally, this can be done in healthy and in very unhealthy ways.

This third party is also subject to experiencing the emotional anxiety brought in by the behavior of the other two. And we see here that God is described as being exceedingly angry because of the complaining. But what we do not see is an emotional response to that anxiety from God. What we see is a solution being offered.

16 *The Lord said to Moses: "Bring me seventy of Israel's elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the tent of meeting, that they may stand there with you. ¹⁷ I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take some of the power of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them. They will share the burden of the people with you so that you will not have to carry it alone.*

And so the theme that "we are in this together," in the spirit that has been given to us by the power of God, to work faith within us.

We see those who are concerned, that those elders who didn't come to the Tent of Meeting were still given the spirit. And in the Gospel (Mark 9:38-50) we see the disciples are concerned a different group of disciples are casting demons out in Jesus name... is this OK? And the answer seems to be that we are IN THIS TOGETHER. Don't lose perspective, don't become the indiscriminating rabble, but remain in the faith and continue to do the work that our Lord has called us to do.

The perspective I'm offering you is to be aware of your own emotional anxiety as you deal with the unrestrained, promiscuous, complaining and anxious emotional and undiscerning voices in our culture... Both INSIDE and OUTSIDE of the church. But may you respond by laying your own anxieties on the Lord.

1Peter5

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. **7** *Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*

8 *Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a*

roaring lion looking for someone to devour. **9** *Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.*

10 *And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.* **11** *To him be the power for ever and ever.*

Amen.