

“Rabble”

The 18th Sunday after Pentecost - 9.26.2021 - Numbers 4; Mark 9:38-50/B

For every “in” group there are those who are on the fringe. Regardless of how clearly said group is identified, there always seem to be folks around the edges. Maybe they simply do not wish to be visible or to have to join the group they are following. Maybe they fear too much commitment or structure or responsibility. We may never know. But both our Old Testament and Gospel lessons today have stories that mention some of those who seem to be “on the outside looking in.”

The first story, from the book of Numbers, is about the people of Israel who are wandering in the wilderness. With them, there are some folks who seem to be the source of the complaints about the miraculous food called manna that God was supplying. Look again at your bulletin jacket: the reading begins, “The *rabble* among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again and said, ‘*If only we had meat to eat!*’” What that tells us is that the Israelites were not the only ones wandering in the desert - they seem to have had a collection of others - a word used only once in Scripture which is translated “rabble” and defined as “a collection of mixed peoples, scraped together and looked upon with contempt.” They were traveling with the Israelites, enjoying the fruits of their very loose affiliation to those who had fled slavery in Egypt and were seeking freedom in the Land God had promised them. Leave it to the ones who have not borne the burden of community to be the very ones who complain the loudest.

While the Old Testament reading points a guilty finger at the rabble, it also includes the people of Israel among those who were yearning to go back. Here is where I discovered what I affectionately call the *Back to Egypt* committee. That’s the committee for people who really want to go back to the good old days, even as they know that you can’t go home again or turn back time. But the Israelites’ reverie was about cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic! Odd, isn’t it? I mean, who longs for veggies?! Who wants to go back to slavery? It is understandable, I guess, that after wandering for so long, they just wanted to go *home* to something familiar.

We can relate to that. How often have you heard the term “back to normal” in the past two years? We’ve all been waiting and hoping and wishing for things to return to the way they were before March of 2020, but we are also realizing that the further away we get from our pre-pandemic way of life - the less chance we have of recapturing it. We are going to the Promised Land - whatever that may look like - and we are not going back. Because we can’t.

Research about grieving tells us that it takes about two years to begin to adjust. In the first year of a significant loss, the effects of that loss produce an experience not unlike “*manna in the wilderness*.” During this period, God feeds and nourishes us with just enough to get us through the next day or the next hour. But by Year Two, we know there is no going back to the way we were. Our daily prayers shift to asking for the strength to turn from what’s behind us and to move toward what lies ahead – even into a wilderness journey that we did not choose. In real life, nobody likes change, until what has changed becomes “the way we’ve always done it.” So, until we see what we are doing now as the normal “way we do it now” we will never really adapt to the opportunities that lie ahead of us. In the meantime, we just need God’s help finding our way in a new land.

For the second story we must fast forward over 1,000 years to Jesus, still sitting in the midst of his disciples where we left him last week, teaching them his final lessons, and holding a child on his lap. John, an insider, brother of James and a fisherman with Peter and Andrew, is

the one who has some issues with an outsider. Now, remember that the disciples have been jockeying for position in the past few chapters, with Peter being praised, then rebuked by Jesus and a number of the 12 being called out because they were discussing who among them was the greatest. Regardless of the fact that they were the insiders, they were beginning to fear that they didn't quite fit, so John pushes the boundary and complains to Jesus that there was someone casting out demons in his name. In an effort to gain Jesus' approval, John reports that they had told the imposter to stop. Why? Maybe John believed him to be **rabble**, not one of them - not good enough. Or maybe he was jealous - for the disciples themselves had just failed to cast a spirit out of a little boy. At the very least, maybe they were trying to protect the "purity" of Jesus' message and mission lest the imposter try to jump on the bandwagon of Jesus' popularity for selfish gain. We just cannot know what they were thinking.

But we can be sure of the intent behind Jesus's response. It might be surprisingly, that rather than punishing the outsiders who dared to cast out demons in Jesus' name, he tells the disciples that the path to belief is different for everyone; and he corrects John's misconception of his mission when he says, "Do not stop him... Whoever is not against us is for us." In this moment, Jesus models a radical grace, and reminds them that being a bump in the road has dire consequences for insiders and outsiders alike: including sinking in the sea because of rock around your neck; or cutting off your hands or your feet or tearing out your eyes if they lead you to hinder someone seeking to know Jesus better. (Please note here that Jesus' ministry thus far has included those who have had a withered hand, were unable to stand and walk, or were completely blind.) A collection of mixed people on the fringes, seen with contempt. They might as well have been called rabble. So, is Jesus saying that their lot in life is better than being cut off from him and God's kingdom? I believe he is. Perhaps we might hear this better if Jesus said, "Don't take advantage of what you have been given by getting between me and the world that I love."

As Lutherans, you'd think we know how to navigate a new life in a new land. We are historically, and continue to be, largely a community of immigrants and their children, who have had to learn new rules and cultural ways with every generation. Adaptation has never been our challenge. But sometimes I think we do impede our own path of faith with excuses about involvement in the faith community that gathers around God and each other.

Have we not placed obstacles before others who would love to receive our invitation and welcome, but do not look like we do? Are we forgetting about the world on the edges by putting our preferences before their survival? Do we do God's work with our hands by lifting up the lowly, seeking release for the captives, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and loving the neighbor only when it is convenient? Are we doing justice and loving mercy, and when we look at the other do we see the face of God?

Author Wendell Berry writes, "*We have lived our lives by the assumption that what was good for us would be good for the world. We have been wrong. We must change our lives so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption, that what is good for the world will be good for us. And that requires that we make the effort to know the world and learn what is good for it.*"

A few weeks ago we explored the question that Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Today I'd like to flip that question and ask you "who do people say that you are?" Are you inside or outside in your family, your workplace, your school or your relationships? Are you part of the in crowd here at church, or has the situation we are living kept you on the outside looking in through your computer screen or your television?

Who do people say that WE are? Are we simply “that big church on the corner of 151st and Quivira - the one with the preschool? I think it’s Lutheran, you know, sort of like Catholic, but not.” Let’s talk about the people who are missing from our pews. I’m not talking about members who were on the edge of leaving even before the shutdown, and have found it convenient not to return. I’m not talking about those who chose to change where they worship for family or convenience or doctrinal differences. I’m talking about who is missing...

I’m talking about our children and their friends and children (those under age 40 who are absent from our online analytics)

I’m talking about millennials who want a church that is non-judgmental and full of grace; And the Gen Xers who are desperately trying to find a church that is active in its outreach to the poor and hopeless and are willing to get out and serve those in need And Generation Y who needs a place to belong that is racially and gender diverse, who want to share wisdom about relationship with God and how faith works

In other words, those who are mostly not sitting here today, or watching us online - folks who are hanging around the edges of church communities and who expect Christians to show every neighbor how to love and actually put their faith into action. For if that is not who we are, it is just not a good enough witness to God’s love. The work we are being called to do is different from what we have done when we just opened the doors and called out into the world, “Come and See!” Now we need to have skin in the game, and the game is not in here - it is out there where you live as well. And this work will not be without a cost to us, individually and collectively.

“To follow Jesus is not a call to perpetual suffering for the sake of suffering. To follow Jesus is to accept pain as a consequence of discipleship that requires one to participate in boundary-breaking ministry like his.” Taking up the cross of Christ is not just a metaphor. It costs.

As we gather during our homecoming month of October, we will celebrate where we have been and who we have been since 1981. We will mark the decades of members and servants and what we have seen and experienced together. We will ask you to fill out a survey that will help us define “who do people say that we are?” and we will begin the journey **out** of our current wilderness together - members and visitors - in-person and virtual - all of us together in Christ, as we move closer to the promises God made with us in our baptism and renews each and every day. Thus we will go forth - insiders and outsiders - privileged and rabble. Each and every one of us beloved; precious in the Kingdom of God. Amen.

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Resources: Raquel A. St. Clair in *Call and Consequences (2008)* used in the *Fortress Commentary on the Bible*; Sami Johnson, Andalucia, Spain, for *ELCA Faith Lens*; ideas from Pastor Keith Marshall and Wendell Berry.