

A Gift Without Strings Attached

Numbers 11:24-30

We are not told what kept the two delinquent elders from making the meeting. Perhaps a son or daughter had a soccer match with the neighboring Hittites that caused them to miss out. Maybe one of them had a wife that was in labor while the other was away on business or a family vacation. It really doesn't matter what the reason was. You and I have all kinds of activities that vie for our attention, and there are a few legitimate reasons for missing church. I say "a few" because the 3rd Commandment rules out most of the ones that we deem worthy of skipping out on church.

Whatever the case was that beckoned these men of good repute among the people, the important thing for us to remember is that they were outside the tent of meeting when the Spirit of God descended on the others. They were not considered a part of the other 68 elders who did take the time and were on the attendance roll that memorable day. At least this is the perception of Joshua who raises an interesting objection with the chair of the meeting—Moses. This obvious absence of the two and the objection of the one find their vortex in the work of the Holy Spirit. He is the true focus of the text. His work trumps both absence and objection. His coming to rest on both the 68 gathered and the two who missed the meeting is reason for all of God's people to rejoice and count their blessings.

So this morning as we gather in this sanctuary of meeting dedicated and consecrated to glory of the Holy Trinity whom we worship and adore, we consider this holy Word on Pentecost Sunday under the theme: *A Gift Without Strings Attached*. Joshua reminds us of that hideous "teacher's pet" from grade school. He's the kind of kid who always has to go snitching to the teacher when the slightest rule is bent, or another kid in the class comes up with a better idea than his own. He's the type of kid everyone loves to hate because he's a know-it-all and is always trying to make points with the only one who raise his grade.

Eldad and Medad are the bull's eye of Joshua's complaint not mainly because they missed the meeting, but especially because the Holy Spirit comes to them outside the proper means. There's the rub for Joshua. There's the beef for each of us who are faithful church-goers and faithful servants of the Lord. Our attendance should count

for something. Our efforts to be true Christians ought to merit some good with God. Moses, you saw that we 68 were there under the umbrella of God's grace while these other two were outside of it. We should rightly receive the gift, but Eldad and Medad should be excluded because they didn't complete the course. They shouldn't have received their continuing education credits. They are not worthy to receive the gift that God chooses to give.

You see how Joshua wants to control and regulate according to his own rules what God gives without strings attached? Do you see how his jealousy is a sin that Moses calls into question? Oh, how we would have the person and work of God all neatly arranged and ordered according to human standards! Wouldn't it just be simpler to use our superior human logic and reason to dictate who God is and what He will do for me? Instead we believe in a God who lives and moves and has His being outside of our limited understanding. Nicodemus is reminded of this truth when Jesus Himself teaches him: "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).

God chooses to work when and where He wills without our help and without any merit or worthiness in us. Joshua's hang-up is commonplace in our "me and my" society where one controls and determines one's own destiny. You can be all that you can be! Graduate, go change the world and make it a better place for you. You can do it! You can shape it! You can conquer it if you only look within yourself for the power to succeed! That's what our schools teach, and it is the prevailing philosophy in most mainline Christian church bodies today. The problem is that this Joshua-like teaching isn't Biblical, and it isn't Christ-centered in its focus. It puts you at the center of the universe, not God.

The Bible teaches us to look outside ourselves rather than within. It points us to the Spirit of God who blows where He wishes without our direction and without our prayers. Our God gives His spiritual gifts without strings attached, apart from tent meetings and human institutions. He comes and goes as He pleases in spite of our frail, human ability to grant understanding. This is the beauty of His grace—that God deems to move and shape and mold us even though we sin and deserve His wrath and punishment. He chooses not to throw us away, not to exclude the Eldads and Medads who fall short in our eyes, but rather to raise them up and use them mightily to His glory. His Gospel always trumps the Law. His grace always stretches way beyond our sin and unbelief. His Spirit always out-smarts and overrules our spirits.

Moses rejoiced to see the delinquent two prophesying along with the faithful 68. He praised God for gifts that come to God's people without strings attached. In His

exuberance, Moses helped Joshua see the mysterious wonder of God at work among His unworthy people by crying out, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put His Spirit on them!" (Numbers 11:29) In Holy Baptism, God the Holy Spirit comes to rest on those He chooses to forgive and save. He rests on them whether they are baptized at the font in a church or in the moving waters of Belt Creek or on the battlefield of Normandy or at the international space station orbiting this temporary home we call earth. Where God's Word is spoken along with water, there God puts His name on us and chooses to make His dwelling among us.

Our prayer today transcends each and every day as we remember and rejoice in our baptism. "Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful, and kindle in them the fire of Your love" is a prayer that God would keep bringing us His gifts without strings attached to the Medads and Eldads of our modern time. Come to us that our love for You might not burn out but remain kindled and alive. Come to us even when our hearts and minds reflect the misguided and short-sighted thinking of Joshua. Come to us, Holy Spirit, and remind us that Jesus died on the cross to take our sins away by the shedding of His blood. Come to us that in time and in eternity we might be partakers of Your glory without strings attached. Amen.