

## Homily – September 29<sup>th</sup>, 2024 – 26<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time



I am no mind reader. However, I know that questions do swirl around in the minds of many people who form the Church, questions like, “Who’s who and what’s what? Who has the right to say or to do what, when and where? Who’s in and who’s out?”

These are questions in today’s scripture passages and, as petty as it may sound, are still being asked today. I think a lot of it has to do with control and how we are so unsettled and so uncomfortable in situations that we can’t control.

Picture that first reading from the Book of Numbers. It’s about 1,300 years before the birth of Jesus. God, through Moses, is leading our ancestors in the faith, the Hebrew people, out of slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land. It’s not an easy journey, nothing is straightforward, people are prone to complaining and bickering, and it took 40 years to accomplish. (I hope I didn’t just describe your marriage!). Moses feels he had done all he could, he’s exhausted and complains to God about his frustrations. He says, “God if your intention was to kill me, I just wish you wouldn’t have dragged it out for 40 years!” (Maybe you know someone who has been dealing with chronic illness and feels the same way Moses did). God replied by saying, “Moses, is your image of me so small that you don’t think that I can provide for you and for these people? If you think that way, you obviously

don't know me." God hears Moses' frustration and offers to lighten the prophet's workload. God instructed Moses to gather 72 elders, and they were to meet outside the camp in a tent for what sounds like an ordination. For whatever reason, two of the elders, Eldad and Medad, were left behind in the camp; they never made it to the tent. In the tent, God took some of the spirit, that was exclusively on Moses and put it on the 70 elders. These 70 prophesied, they spoke the Word of God, but only once and never again we are told. The two who stayed in the camp, Eldad and Medad, were not "ordained" but prophesied anyway. The gift of prophesy, was not a onetime event, as it was for the 70, but these two continued to prophesy. It seems to me that the words of the 70 "ordained" elders was easily forgotten; no one remembers anything they said. It made no impression on people. But the words of the two, who were not ordained, was something people wanted more and more of, so they kept prophesying.

Joshua, Moses' right-hand man, doesn't think this is right and complains to Moses that the two who didn't make it to the tent for the ordination are prophesying freely back at the camp. Joshua wants to know if he has Moses' permission to stop them. After all, they are not properly ordained or licensed to be doing what they are doing. Moses responds to Joshua with a brilliant answer, "Are you jealous, Joshua? Wouldn't it be a wonderful world, where all God's people would be prophets with God's spirit in them!"

Joshua learned an important lesson that day that he carried with him as he succeeded Moses as the people's leader. Joshua felt that the world, or at least something in his world, was out of control. In a sense he was right. Something was

out of control; it's called God's Spirit. The tent was too small to contain God's Spirit and that Spirit spilled over into the camp and beyond. It is a Spirit that blows where it will, like the wind, and refuses to be boxed in. Joshua had to learn to enlarge the tent, to expand his mind and consciousness and give God's Spirit free reign. As it turned out, those not ordained, continued to speak and prophesy, while those who were ordained spoke only once. So, who really had the Spirit on them?

This story is repeated, 1300 years later, in today's gospel account. Jesus has sent out his disciples on a mission. They come back scandalized, much like Joshua was, because they ***saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.*** This guy wasn't legally sanctioned as we were, so we thought it best to try to shut him down. Jesus gives the corrective and says, "Don't stop him, if he's doing deeds of power in *my* name, how could anything evil possible come of it?" Notice the language of the disciples are using. They complained that someone was casting out demons in *your* name, in Jesus' name. So, obviously, whoever this guy was, he wasn't in it for himself; he was in it to make Jesus' name known. The second part of the complaint goes like this, "we tried to stop him, because he was not following *us*." He was not following "***us***"? The point is not to follow the disciples, *us*, but to follow Jesus. The point is to get out of the way, to become transparent, so that when people see us, they don't see us, but they see God working through us.

If it's ultimately about us and not about God, we will speak our words only once and never will people ask us to speak again. But if it's about God, we will speak

our words and people will ask, “Can you tell me more about this Jesus?” It won’t matter whether those words come from someone ordained or not. What will matter is that those words ring true in me, and I want to grow in the Truth. I want to hear more, because the Spirit of God in you is bringing something alive in me.

Apart from Mother Mary and the Apostles, the most popular saint worldwide is St. Francis of Assisi. (More biographies were written about his life than any other person who has ever lived). He lived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century when few people went to Mass and the few that did were meant to feel they were unworthy of the sacraments. The clergy made it clear about who was in and who was out, who was worthy and who wasn’t. Francis, refuse to get ordained, although he was pressured to do so. He didn’t want to be co-opted by any kingdom less than that of the “Great King,” Jesus. He also refused to allow his followers, the first Franciscans, to be ordained, although later they caved in. Francis was a prophet and a mystic. Prophets and mystics are not appointed by any institutional system or authority which leaves them free to speak from their own experience and inner freedom of Spirit. Francis was not opposed to anyone getting ordained, and he loved the Church deeply. But he feared that if he was ordained, he would become such a “company man” that he would lose the freedom to speak prophetically to that company. (I’ve just described 98% of today’s priests—company men). Francis didn’t want anything at all, including ordination and towing the line, to compromise his ability to be a prophet. Once a prophet is institutionalized, they lose the freedom to speak prophetically. Francis was the one who didn’t make it into the tent for ordination, but he was given the spirit to prophesy. Many

ordained have come and gone and nobody remembers a word they said. Francis was not ordained but continues to speak to us 800 years later.

We still have prophets in our midst. They didn't make it to the tent, but they do remind us that our tent is too small. There are many in our town and in our world who are working tirelessly for the poor, but we don't give them the time of day because they don't follow us, they don't come to Church. Maybe it's best to stop them before they put up a detox center in our backyard.

According to the old maxim, all roads lead to Rome, but Pope John XXIII knew that the only road leading to eternal life —“I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life...” — does not necessarily pass through the eternal city, nor the Church which has her headquarters there.

~Fr. Phil