



We're Gonna Need a Bigger Tent – Touchpoint for May 24, 2023

Numbers 11:24-29 (NRSVUE) ²⁴ So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD, and he gathered seventy of the elders of the people and placed them all around the tent. ²⁵ 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.

²⁶ 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, so they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷ And a young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.” ²⁸ And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, “My lord Moses, stop them!” ²⁹ 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!”

Grace and Peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

“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!’”

I stumbled across this passage about five years ago and it has become one of my favorites. When I read it, I laugh, and then I cry, only to end up laughing again.

I mean, if you are a religious leader, clergy, spiritual director, church elder or otherwise, this passage is both amusing and frightening. Amusing because it shows the small mindedness of religious leaders, and frightening for the exact same thing. This passage is a shot across the bow of any religious institution which believes the faith – the Spirit – is limited to its own tent.

So here is an Old Testament Pentecost story... the pouring out of the Spirit on the elders of the tribes of Israel. Poured out to those who have gathered around the tent. Poured out by God, from and through the prophet Moses.

And everything appears fine and good. All those around the tent can feel good about themselves. They have the Spirit. They possess it. It is shared and owned by the individuals and this special community – the elders, those set apart, ordained to be the leaders.

But then something happens. Something unexpected. The Spirit seems to leak out from the tent. It seems to be bigger than the tent. It seems it cannot be contained by the tent.

It falls on two people in the camp. Two people who have never been in or around the tent. They too, fall under the influence of the Spirit... and well...

Dear God!!! This cannot be!!!

And so, someone from the camp runs to the tent to report it, and it causes quite a ruckus. So Joshua, one of Moses' top assistants, demands that Moses put a stop to it. We can't have the Spirit running amok! We can't have the Spirit out of control.

And therein lies the rub: We can't have the Spirit out of control.

I spoke a few weeks ago, that there are three addictions that we all live with:

- 1) The need to be right.
- 2) The need to be enough, and...
- 3) The need to be in control.

In control of everything, even the Spirit. And when we encounter the Spirit, we are not sure what to do with it. And so we try to tame it, control it, nail it down. But if Jesus taught us anything, it's that you can't keep God nailed down. At least not for more than three days.

That's why Peter's response to the people in the Book of Acts version of Pentecost is so fascinating. When the apostles are speaking in tongues, people accuse Peter and the apostles of being drunk. Now you would think that Peter would be offended by this, but he isn't. And he has one of the most amusing and insightful comments in the Bible, as far as I am concerned.

Basically, he says, "Oh, we're not drunk on wine and spirits. It's too early for that. It's only 9am. Now, maybe if you caught us in the afternoon, you might have a good case. No, we're not drunk on wine and spirits... we're drunk on SPIRIT... Big "S" Spirit."

You see, Peter isn't afraid to say he and the apostles are out of control, living under the influence. No, he will readily admit that. It's just that what they are under the influence of is something everyone needs to be under the influence of.

Believe it or not, it's ok to be out of control and accept it. Because, well, we never were in total control to begin with.

You see, there is a God in whom we live and move and have our being. A God we cannot control, though it often seems that is what most religions try to do.

And so there is another statement in this Acts version of Pentecost that is eye-opening:

"Each of us hears in our own language."

Wait... What? Other people hear things differently from me?!!?

Other people experience things differently than I do?!!?

Not everyone lives and moves and has their being in my tent?!!?

Well, how can I control things if other people don't hear and think like I do?!!?

These passages expose my simple mindedness and mock it. And as I said earlier, I'm not sure whether to laugh or cry. I mean, I can laugh at the narrow mindedness of those in Moses' tent, but I cry when I realize they are me and I am them.

And so, I must realize that Spirit lives outside of my tent. And the gospel exists outside of my language and cultural expressions. The Spirit and the gospel are out there, moving in the world. Bigger than me. Beyond me. And I might be wise to engage myself in the Spirit, as it lives out in the world, and not just inside my tent.

"Would that the Lord put his Spirit on all people," as Moses wisely says.

Which leads me to this last quote from the gospel of John's Pentecost story:

"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

When these words are read in light of the previous bible passages from Numbers and Acts, I think we can see them in a new way. Because this passage has often been abused, in my opinion, by the Church.

As Matt Skinner writes:

Jesus is not appointing the church as his moral watchdog; nor does he commission it to arbitrate people's assets and liabilities on a heavenly balance sheet... Jesus is not—at least, not in this verse—granting the church a unique spiritual authority.

Let's take the last part of the sentence first: *"If you retain the sins of any, they are retained."*

Now first of all, the 'they' in that sentence refers to the 'sins,' not the people. The people aren't retained, the sins are. And who retains the sin? You do. I do. If YOU retain the sins of any, they are retained... by YOU!

Now why would you want to do that??? What are you going to do with them?

It's like this, did you ever hold a grudge against somebody who has moved on? I know I have. It's why I held on to the grudge. Somebody had to. What that person did to me was so grievous that life shouldn't simply go on. **SOMEBODY HAS TO PAY!!!**

Unfortunately I was the one who paid, not the other person. They had moved on with their life. They were actually living in forgiveness. But, BY GOD, I wasn't going to. So you see, if I retain a grudge against anybody, it is retained BY ME.

And why would I want to do that? How should I know! But it does give me a sense of power and control. Someone once said, "Holding a grudge against another person is like drinking poison and expecting to harm the other person."

And now, to the first part of the sentence: *"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven."*

Again, the 'they' in that sentence refers to the sins, not the people. The people are already forgiven. It is up to you, whether you want to live in that forgiveness or not. It is up to the Church to live in the forgiveness that was given from the Cross. It is up to the Church to bear witness to the forgiveness that has been given

to the world. The Church does not possess or own forgiveness. It is not a commodity of the Church. The Church either participates and bears witness to it, or it doesn't.

According to John's gospel, forgiveness is done. *"IT IS FINISHED."* These are the last words of the earthly Jesus in John's gospel. The promise made in John 3:17 that *"God sent his Son into the world that through him it might be saved"...* IS COMPLETE.

"IT IS FINISHED."

If you don't forgive somebody, it's you holding onto the sin, not the other person. If you forgive the sins of somebody, you are participating in the forgiveness already given them by God.

So we – you, me and the Church – participate in the forgiveness of sin by bearing witness to the forgiveness that God pronounced from the Cross. Or we retain the sin, to our detriment, by not bearing witness to God's grace. But forgiveness is not a possession of ours. It is not under our control.

And so, the idea that forgiveness of sin is only available inside the Church is like believing the Spirit can only exist inside our tent, or only in our language and cultural concepts.

So, to those who are in love with their religious and spiritual tents, let me paraphrase Police Chief Martin Brody from the original *Jaws* movie, "You're gonna need a bigger tent."

Because... On the night in which he was betrayed, our Lord Jesus took wine and said, *"This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Shed for you and for ALL PEOPLE for the forgiveness of sin."*

That's a pretty big tent of forgiveness.

Amen.

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Song

Be Still

(London Fox Taizé Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God.

Calm Me Lord

(Margaret Rizza)

Calm me Lord as you calmed the storm.
Still me Lord, keep me from harm.
Let all the tumult within me cease.
Enfold me Lord, in your peace.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Come Drink of Living Water

(London Fox Taizé Choir)

Come drink of living water. Never thirst again.

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(Monastery Choir of St. John of San Francisco)

Benediction

The Lord Bless You and Keep You

(National Lutheran Choir, Peter C. Lutkin)

The Lord bless you and keep you.
The Lord lift his countenance upon you... and give you peace.
The Lord make his face to shine upon you... and be gracious unto you.
The Lord be gracious unto you. Amen.