

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 19th Sunday after Pentecost, September 30, 2018.

Today's lessons are about being really grumpy when we feel we are being asked to do too much. The lessons are also about selfishness when we try to keep a privilege to ourselves.

And how do the principal characters of these lessons – God and James and Jesus - deal with grumpiness and selfishness? They tell us plainly, "Stop your whining. Be thankful that there are people who want to help. Don't stand in their way. Invite them in. There's plenty of work for everybody."

You and I know these feelings. Sometimes we complain about being over-worked, and other times we complain about people always wanting to help us. We can't have it both ways.

In the passage from Numbers (**Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29**), Moses complains that God has laid too much responsibility on him. "Why have you treated your servant so badly? ... I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me." So, how does God respond to this grumpiness? God takes "some of the spirit that was on Moses and puts it on the seventy elders." Eldad and Medad were among the seventy. Joshua, the assistant to Moses, complains about the extra help. To the credit of Moses, he tells Joshua not to be jealous, but to give thanks.

The author of the Letter of James (**James 5:13-20**) is responding to a series of complaints. He looks around and sees much suffering, but not much helpful response to such suffering. "If you are suffering," he says, "pray for healing. If you are people of faith, share your faith, not in word only, but in good works." In other words, don't wait for God to do all the work. You're more than capable of helping out.

The author cites Elijah, "a human being like us." "Elijah prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain. Then he prayed again, and this time the heavens gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest." The message is be confident in what you pray for, and be careful in what you pray for.

By all means, don't wallow in suffering. Do what you can to alleviate that suffering. The least you can do is pray for healing.

Now, we don't know the extent to which our prayers help. There are all sorts of factors that contribute to healing, including the skill and dedication and compassion of those who care for those who suffer. But these professionals are not alone in the alleviation of suffering. Indeed often they are the first to say that there are many roles for people to play in healing, prayer being one of those roles.

James reminds us that "the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." Too often, we people of faith don't believe this, or, if we believe this, we don't practice it. We talk a good game, but sometimes our talk is just that, talk. Today's psalm (**Psalm 19:7-14**) calls this lack of follow through a "presumptuous sin" and a "great offense." Again, the least we can do is to pray. We offer up. That's a start. And that's our role. God might respond in a manner that we don't understand, but that is not to say that God doesn't hear us and thank us. We offer, and then we trust.

In today's gospel (**Mark 9:38-50**), John tells Jesus that someone is casting out demons in the name of Jesus. John says that he and the other disciples tried to stop the person from exercising their role. Jesus is quick to respond: "Do not stop him, for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us."

Jesus goes on to remind John and the others that they are not to hoard Jesus. "It would be better for you, John, if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea." You are to share me, not possess me. If others want to be with me, let them do so. The whole point of the Messiah is to lift all, not a dozen, but all, to new life.

Jesus cites the importance of salt, as a preserver of that which is good. "Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another." When you try to keep me to yourselves rather than encouraging others to believe and participate, you lose you "saltiness." Stay fresh by encouraging others, not only to receive me, but to share me."

This is a lesson we all need to hear about all sorts of good things. Yes, God wants us to receive with thanksgiving His Son, but not for the purpose of confining that Son to a few.

Sometimes we possess, as a means of protecting something precious. But the One whom we regard as precious, indeed the One we know as the Savior, is meant to be exposed, to be made public, to become available on a grand scale. And it doesn't matter if that exposure is made possible by a few or many. Preferably "many." The more the merrier.

Think of the relationship of Crucifixion and Resurrection and Ascension and Pentecost. God didn't stop with the Crucifixion. And God didn't stop with the Resurrection. And God didn't stop with the Ascension. No, God kept going, kept sharing, kept expanding the number of people touched by the Risen Christ. That's what Pentecost is all about. We are a part of an ever-widening net of proclamation. We don't have to go to John for permission to share Jesus. We have a green light. Besides, a millstone about our neck is no picnic.

Now, exercising the green light might generate some push-back, but, as Jesus says to John in today's gospel, "It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell."

The long and short of today's lessons is to give thanks for the Risen Lord, not by keeping him to ourselves, but by carrying him out into the world, where others can be as blessed as we are.

As we were singing our opening hymn last week – Lord Christ, when first thou cam'st to earth – I was struck by the phrase "We bring our hearts before thy cross, to finish thy salvation." "To finish thy salvation." It's as if the Risen Christ needs our help to get him and us across the finish line. The ultimate victory won't be achieved without our help.

Well, can you imagine being asked by Jesus to help him across the finish line, and then saying to those who want to join in that effort, "No, that won't be necessary. We've got it under control." Well, if Jesus heard us say that to others, he would admonish us. "Let them help. I need you all. It's a big tent. No exclusions. Share, don't hoard." Or, as Moses says to Joshua in our lesson from Numbers:

“Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them!”

We are the Lord’s people, called to be prophets, called to share, including the alleviation of suffering through prayer. It’s a start, and well within our means. So, no more grumpiness. No more selfishness. No more millstone. And, if others want to join us, welcome aboard. Again, there is plenty of finishing work for everyone.

Amen.