

Genesis 2: 18-23
Numbers 11: 4-17, 24-30
Mark 9: 38-41

Deeds of Power
October 4, 2015
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Last Sunday, September 27, we worshiped here in a different way, celebrating the spirituality of music and the joy of community. For those of us who could be here, the memory of it is uplifting, or in Evelyn Ellis' words, "the glorious cloud of happy-place created by Sunday's service." There was no particular Christian holiday to celebrate, but our hearts opened as we breathed and sang together. We welcomed guest musicians and others and felt the exhilaration of inclusiveness and hope. We sang the truth in the words, "I am only one, but I'm still one. I can't do everything, but I can do something. I'll not refuse the something I can do." This has been my mantra all week, by the way.

The Jewish Feast of the Tabernacle, Sukkot, began at sundown on Sunday, September 27 this year, and ends at nightfall tonight. Every year, I remember the Sukkot I spent in Iran, 12 years ago. Our group was in the ancient desert city of Yazd, and there were lots of people celebrating. Most of them were celebrating the birthday of Imam Mahdi, the mystical Twelfth Imam of Shia Islam. The streets were crowded with people and camels, lights and music. Our tour bus was stopped so that young men with trays could come on and serve us juice and cookies – extravagant hospitality to strangers is one feature of this Muslim holiday. But the same evening, we met some Iranian Jews at a museum. They insisted that 3 of us come to their house (we had to sneak away from the tour leader to do this) because their Sukkot booth was set up and they were eager to entertain strangers with tea and pomegranates. Turns out that they were also in the business of extravagant hospitality. Both holidays illustrate the expansiveness of religions we expect to be more restrictive: the willingness to risk safety by taking down the fence.

But we need fences, don't we? We have to know whether we belong. We have to know who is in our tribe. **And** we would like to know who is in charge, please. Boundaries keep us safe. Hierarchies keep us safe. So many religions have a history of dialogue about who is in and who is out, who is in charge and who is not. There is some tension about the yearning of the human spirit for freedom and the orderliness of our group systems. When we turn to our Scripture, we find that same tension and dialogue going on. Those techniques of human survival, those tribal feelings, are reflected in stories of liberation and law-giving and healing and grace. We get a complex picture of chosen people and overflowing Spirit; of ritual holiness and unexpected forgiveness; of unjust insiders and merciful outsiders. The dialogue takes place in human action, but also in our striving for intimacy with the divine. The Hebrew Scriptures are particularly rich in stories that challenge our thinking about where – and whether - we belong.

Our reading from those Scriptures gives us some insight into both human frailty and expansive thinking. This takes place during the Exodus, in the wilderness with the newly liberated Hebrew people. Moses is their leader, and he is fed up. He has had enough of the people complaining about how hard freedom is. And – of course – he takes it out on God. **He** becomes the whiner: "Why did you lay the burden of all these people on me? Put me out of my misery – put me to death – I am done!"

Thank goodness, God has other solutions. Basically, God says, “Delegate, Moses. I will spread the Spirit around, so that you will not bear this burden alone.” And so it is. Seventy other men were touched by the presence of God in the cloud and they spoke prophetic words. But, the story goes on, there was an exception to the rule. The Spirit rested on two men away from the tent of worship, down with all the other people. Joshua – and probably others – thought, “This breaks all the rules!” “Moses, stop them!” he cries. But Moses, perhaps with the wisdom born of exhausted leadership, says those prophetic words, “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put His Spirit on them!”

Just in case you wondered whether human nature had changed over the next thousand years or so, we get a Gospel story with a similar dynamic. Jesus and his disciples have been on the road, teaching and healing. Shortly before this scene, we had heard of the disciples unable to help a boy who had a self-destructive malady. Jesus is able to heal the boy, and says that it is the power of prayer at work. In our passage, the disciple John announces that he has tried to stop another healer – one who was successful at casting out destructive spirits - one who was working in Jesus’ name - because he was not part of their circle. Another boundary drawn, another fence built. I suppose John was looking for Jesus’ approval, of recognition that he had protected that healing power from outsiders.

Jesus, like Moses before him, is not concerned with limiting God’s powerful Spirit to a few people. He says that whoever does a deed of power, a good work in his name will somehow be claimed by that name, and have a hard time speaking against him in the future. “Whoever is not against us is for us.” The boundary is broken, or at least redrawn in terms of powerful deeds for good. Then suddenly Jesus turns the image around, and makes the disciples the recipients of kindness. Whoever does the good deed for **you** will be rewarded, even if it is as small as a cup of water. It is as if Jesus was asking them to imagine the relief of the one who was healed by that unauthorized exorcist. And to imagine that they might find themselves, one day, dependent on God’s grace at the hand of a stranger – a deed of subversive power.

I am going to tell you the story of one such deed of power. It was told back in the 1950s by William Barclay in the *Daily Study Bible*:

In the Second World War, a group of soldiers were fighting in the rural countryside of France. During an intense battle, one of the American soldiers was killed. His comrades did not want to leave his body on the battlefield and decided to give him a Christian burial. They remembered a church a few miles behind the front lines whose grounds included a small cemetery surrounded by a white fence. After receiving permission to take their friend’s body to the cemetery, they set out for the church, arriving just before sunset. A priest, his bent-over back and frail body betraying his many years, responded to their knocking. His face, deeply wrinkled with tan, was the home of two fierce eyes that flashed with wisdom and passion. “Our friend was killed in battle,” they blurted out, “and we wanted to give him a church burial.” Apparently the priest understood what they were asking, although he spoke in very broken English. “I’m sorry,” he said, “but we can buy only members of our church here.” Weary after many months of war, the soldiers simply turned to walk away. “But,” the old priest called after them, “you can bury him outside the fence.” Cynical and exhausted, the soldiers dug a grave and buried their friend just outside the white fence. They finished after nightfall. The next morning, the entire unit was ordered to move on, and the group

raced back to the little church for one final goodbye to their friend. When they arrived, they couldn't find the gravesite, tired and confused, they knocked on the door of the church. They asked the old priest if he knew where they had buried their friend. "It was dark last night and we were exhausted. We must have been disoriented." A smile flashed across the old priest's face. "After you left last night, I could not sleep, so I went outside early this morning and I moved the fence.

Instead of drawing lines of insider and outsider to discover and express identity, we find another way, another currency. Mercy, love, welcome, compassion are the vehicles through which we discover who we are. These are things that are hard to measure, but we know that there is no scarcity of opportunity to care for others, no lack of occasions to love your neighbor. And there are always new ways to perceive God at work in the acts of strangers and foreigners. Boundaries for Jesus seem more permeable, and yet Jesus is concerned about character and behavior. How we live does reflect on what we say. How we share in ministry reflects on what we say.

No scarcity of opportunities for caring. I think of our horror in response to another tragic shooting, this time at a community college in Oregon. I read in the Washington post that this is the 294th such shooting (the FBI defines the shooting deaths of 4 or more people as a mass shooting) this year – out of the 274 days so far. We feel so sad and angry and powerless. And I wonder, what does a deed of power look like in the face of such an event? What does a cup of water look like when the suffering is so intense? I am pretty sure that it is not more gun-power or escalating violence, but... these are the kinds of questions our Scripture poses to me. But, I am only one.

Long ago, the wandering Hebrews told stories about the beginning of human life and human families. They imagined God forming a single person out of dirt (in Hebrew it's a joke: God formed Adam out of *adamah*) and breathing the Spirit into that person and giving him a wonderful garden filled with food. Sounds perfect. But God, in a surprising contradiction of the goodness of creation, says, "It is not good. This will not work. It is not good for a man to be alone." One could say that the rest of the biblical narrative is the unfolding of what it means to move from isolation into community, with all of our needs, failures, compassion and violence. We don't always get it right at first. Our society is full of injustice and violence. But once in a while, we do get it right, and there is a "glorious cloud of happy-place" or a moment of comfort or a deed of power.

May we all find ways to move the fence, to offer that gift, to share the blessings of ministry together. Amen.