

Pastor Jana Schofield

Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 26, 2021

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; (Ps. 19:7-14; James 5:13-20); Mark 9:38-50

I am guessing that if we took a poll today, we would all be 100% in agreement that things are not the same today as they were in early March 2020 before the Covid-19 pandemic began in the US.

Now you can't go into the grocery store or school or pretty much anywhere without a mask. Now in some restaurants you get the menu by scanning a QR code with your phone. And even though we're finally back inside the building for worship you are sitting distanced from the people you used to share a pew or a table with and we can't yet sing. And even if we did sing, the sound would be muffled behind our masks.

Things are not the same as they were before, and with that comes grief.

Things were not the same as they were before for the Israelites, either. In the story we heard today from the Old Testament book of Numbers, the Israelites are wandering in the desert with Moses after escaping slavery in Egypt and they are grieving: "If only we had meat to eat!" they said. "We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."

Even though they had been *slaves* in Egypt, the Israelites were grieving because they missed the foods they used to eat there. Even though God was providing plenty of nourishment for them every day in the form of manna, it wasn't the same as before. And the rabble among them – the complaints among them – had a strong craving.

Even in the gospel today the disciple John complained to Jesus that things weren't the same as before. He and the other disciples had seen someone casting out demons in Jesus' name, and they tried to stop him because he was not following them. He wasn't doing it the same way that they were used to doing it. He wasn't part of their "in-group" and John was upset that

this person who was doing the same work that they did was doing it differently.

Isn't it the same for us? When things are different than they used to be, when things have changed – in society, in the church, in our lives – whether due to Covid, changes in leadership, or just the passage of time – it can cause grief. The rabble among us – the complaints among us – can also have a strong craving when things are not the same as they were before.

A few months ago, our denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, published a book of stories from women clergy, including my own, in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the ordination of women in the Lutheran Church in this country. In the book are joyful stories of women answering God's call to ministry, but also incredibly painful stories from women clergy about the complaints and injustices directed at them solely because they were women pastors.

Even the presiding bishop of the ELCA, Elizabeth Eaton, wrote, "the 40 years [of my ministry] have not been without difficulty. Early on I was often the only woman at clergy gatherings. The legitimacy of my call was challenged. My compensation was less than that of my male colleagues. In every congregation I served, people left because they could not accept a woman pastor. Once, while I was pumping gas in my [clerical collar], a shocked man exclaimed, 'I've never seen a woman before!'"

For everyone in the church 50 years ago, things were not the same as before when women started being ordained and serving churches as pastors. But even though the rabble of those who complained about women being ordained 50 years ago and all the years since has had a strong craving, God's Spirit was moving among the church and in the lives of women to bring about God's vision for the church.

Even in those two stories in scripture we heard today, it was clear that God, that Jesus were both bringing about a new vision that was not the same as the way things were before. In the story in Numbers, God set up a new system of leadership and prophecy with 70 elders that was different from before, and in the gospel of Mark, Jesus told John not to stop the man who was prophesying differently than the disciples were, since, as Jesus said, "whoever is not against us is for us."

Jesus even went further to say that if you are a stumbling block to those who are doing things differently than they were done before, it would be better for you to have a millstone hung around your neck and be thrown into the sea or to cut off your hand or your foot or tear out your eye. Now please know, Jesus was speaking in hyperbole. Please don't go cut off your hand or foot or tear out your eye or drown yourself in the sea. But Jesus is so serious about this that he uses the most extreme language he can. Jesus is clear, God is clear that even though things aren't the same as they were before, even if people are doing things differently than you have always done them, don't be a stumbling block. Don't be like Joshua in the book of Numbers who told Moses to stop Eldad and Medad from prophesying in the camp. Don't be like John who complained to Jesus that someone was casting out demons differently than the disciples did.

Because the danger in being a stumbling block is that you lose your saltiness – you lose the flavor you offer to the community of faith, and you drain the seasoning from the whole church.

You've heard me say before that due to all that has happened the last 18 months, things in the church – in our church – will never be exactly the same as they were before the pandemic. We are entering a new normal, a time when the way things have always been done may be different. And yes, this may cause you grief; it causes me grief.

But what if God, what if Jesus are doing the same thing now that they were doing in the book of Numbers and in the gospel of Mark? What if God and Jesus are calling us into a new vision to help people make spiritual meaning of their lives?

What if God's Spirit is moving in this place to break down the barriers we have put up so that the gospel can spill out to those who need to hear it the most? What if God is using people and ideas and methods we've never used before to bring healing and hope to broken people and a broken world?

What if God is specifically and intentionally calling the church to not be the same as it was before, and to be seasoned in ways we have yet to imagine?

Our God, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, does not change, even when the things around us do. And we can trust the promise of Jesus as we heard in the gospel – that when we receive others who may bring different gifts or do things in different ways, we will by no means lose our reward. Amen.