

In the Wilderness | The Gospel in the Book of Numbers

“Grumbling (Part Two - Complaining Against Our Leaders)”

11.6.16

From Kibroth-hattaavah the people set out for Hazeroth, and they remained at Hazeroth.

¹² Then Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married (for he had married a Cushite woman); ² and they said, "Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?" And the LORD heard it. ³ (Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth.) ⁴ Suddenly the LORD said to Moses and Aaron and to Miriam, "You three come out to the tent of meeting." So the three of them came out. ⁵ Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the doorway of the tent, and He called Aaron and Miriam. When they had both come forward, ⁶ He said,

"Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, shall make Myself known to him in a vision. I shall speak with him in a dream. ⁷ "Not so, with My servant Moses, He is faithful in all My household; ⁸ With him I speak mouth to mouth, Even openly, and not in dark sayings, And he beholds the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid To speak against My servant, against Moses?"

⁹ So the anger of the LORD burned against them and He departed. ¹⁰ But when the cloud had withdrawn from over the tent, behold, Miriam was leprous, as white as snow. As Aaron turned toward Miriam, behold, she was leprous. ¹¹ Then Aaron said to Moses, "Oh, my lord, I beg you, do not account this sin to us, in which we have acted foolishly and in which we have sinned. ¹² "Oh, do not let her be like one dead, whose flesh is half eaten away when he comes from his mother's womb!" ¹³ Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, "O God, heal her, I pray!" ¹⁴ But the LORD said to Moses, "If her father had but spit in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut up for seven days outside the camp, and afterward she may be received again." ¹⁵ So Miriam was shut up outside the camp for seven days, and the people did not move on until Miriam was received again.

¹⁶ Afterward, however, the people moved out from Hazeroth and camped in the wilderness of Paran.

A few weeks ago we started a series on the FOURTH BOOK of the Bible, the Book of Numbers which is, in Hebrew, “ba-mid-bar” – “in the wilderness.”

It tells the story of the Israelites...having come out of Egypt and after being at Sinai... where they met the God of Abraham...and entered into covenant with Him, with YHWH...and are, as it were married to Him.

And NOW they are moving to the Land journeying as pilgrims “ba-mid-bar” (In the Wilderness).

As they journey, they complain, like children, “are we there yet...?” They complain about everything and their grumbling moves from the fringes of their nomadic society toward the center...started with the fringe elements (11.1, 4) and today it’s found in the inner ring...the center...the leaders are complaining about the leader. One mark of the Bible is its refusal to gloss over the flaws of its leaders...we get to see the foibles and crimes of kings and apostles and prophets and here the brother and sister of Moses are eaten up with jealousy...it’s a kind of sibling rivalry...it’s the third of seven rebellions...and it has to do with jealousy... the sin of ENVY (Shakespeare’s “green eyed monster” – Othello).

Let’s look at it today under two simple headings: 1) Envy and Its Deep Roots
2) The Envied Who Can Cut the Roots

There are seven rebellions at the center of this book. They’re recorded very deliberately to draw attention to the center, the fourth rebellion... The rebellions begin just three days into the trip...and the trip that should take about a month ends up taking 40 years.

THIS is the third revolt – it’s ABOUT leadership and it’s IN THE LEADERSHIP. It’s a sibling rivalry; not the first sibling rivalry in the Bible or the last (for that matter). You may remember that in the fourth chapter of the Bible there’s a sibling rivalry that leads to “fratricide” – Abel offers a better sacrifice than his brother Cain...and Cain, by jealousy and resentment (which is really only a nice word for hatred) Cain kills his brother Abel. Cain is given some sort of sign by God (“the mark of Cain”) and he is driven into exile. “And the LORD appointed a sign for Cain, so that no one finding him would slay him. Then Cain went out from the presence of the LORD, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden”. (Gen 4.15-16)

Miriam, Moses’ older sister, seems to be the main antagonist here. Aaron their brother is also involved.

It begins with a simple observation that Moses married a foreigner. We think this is Zipporah who is mentioned in Exodus. Some think it may be a second wife... but whomever this was...she was a Cushite.

She was African/Ethiopian. She had dark skin. Moses and his sibling were likely brown people (browner than I am...I having Irish skin)...but their sister-in-law had darker skin...she was black. Moses married a black woman.

But there is a deeper level of this grumbling...Miriam and Aaron ALSO hear from God - "Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has He not spoken through us as well?"

And that’s a compound question that has an obvious answer but that also begs an explanation...In other words, “Of COURSE God has spoken through Miriam (she’s called a

‘prophetess’ in Exodus 15) and of course Aaron is the mouthpiece for Moses...and he is the high-priest and mediator for Israel ...sure God speaks to Miriam and Aaron... AND WHAT? Why do you raise that issue? What are you getting at?”

“Well... we’re just saying that M-O-S-E-S isn’t the ONLY one to whom God speaks...I’m just saying...just making a simple, innocent observation... Can’t I just make an observation?!”

But it’s really clear...this is NOT just a simple, innocent observation – and isn’t this how we ALSO speak to one another...in our marriages...friendships ... families? “I’m just pointing it out...just remarking ...a harmless comment...isn’t it true?”

Oh, it’s true all right...but there’s also something deeply sinister about this “innocent” comment that is ANYTHING but innocent. The point Miriam the prophetess is making is: Moses gets recognized as a leader and we don’t... all I’m asking is for a little R-E-S-P-E-C-T (when you come home, sock it to me!)”

And again... this is how we roll. We see other people getting their due...we size them up ...in restaurants... on airplanes ... in our neighborhoods...workplace...in our families and IN OUR CHURCHES... “What’s so great about her...I mean...I’m just making an observation... an innocent comment...what’s wrong with noticing?”

We eye one another (Luke 11.34)...just trying to be fair...we just don’t see what this person did to get THAT kind of salary...that kind of car...those kids (Oh, the parenting comparisons we make! Uh...parenting OBSERVATIONS)

Our economy is driven by envy. Much of the advertising industry is dedicated to stirring up this impulse that’s been lurking INSIDE each of us since the moment when God said to the jealous brother Cain, “sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, (Gen 4.7) – first time the word “sin” appears in the Bible – the sin in view was ENVY.

Is it possible, do you think, that YOU are an envious person? Do you wrestle with jealousy... I bet if you think long and hard about it...you will conclude, “No... I honestly don’t think I’m a jealous or envious person... I mean, I’m not perfect...don’t get me wrong... I have flaws...but I’m not a jealous person.”

I’m reminded of Jesus Christ’s words, “Beware AND BE ON YOUR GUARD against every form of greed” (Luke 12.15) ... Envy and jealousy are forms of greed...and Jesus Christ’s words (“beware AND be on your guard”) are to say...even people who are certain they are free from this fault...are quite often ensnared...and they THINK they are just making an innocent observation.

Point is: envy is a very sneaky, slippery thing... few of us see it in our lives and even fewer will have the courage to face it and admit it... AND... to make the situation even worse – it’s poison.

This poem we quoted today, *The Faerie Queen* by Edmund Spenser (1596), it paints a horrible picture of a demon that may be lurking around the door of your heart...your inner life...your motives: "Between his canker'd teeth a venomous toad,/That all the poison ran about his jaw/
And neighbor's wealth, that made him ever sad;/ For death it was when any good he saw,...But when he heard of harm, he waxed wondrous glad."

It's a creepy few lines and again...we will do anything to close our eyes to it in ourselves...but here it is in the hearts of these great leaders...Miriam and Aaron and maybe the roots of it...deeper than we think are in our own hearts...when we're people watching (nothing wrong with people watching) when we get word of a co-worker's success...a fellow student who get's the "A+" when I only got an "A" ("I mean I thought his presentation was excellent... I dunno if it was all that...but really good...")

I think of one of the most notorious displays of envy in modern memory... the 1994 Winter Olympics. When it appeared that Nancy Kerrigan would take the gold for the U.S. Figure Skating team and Tonya Harding's husband apparently hired a thug to break Nancy Kerrigan's leg... but it's rarely so clear that envy comes out from its lurking into plain view.

And that brings me to the ENVIED...Moses is NO hot-shot, flaunting his power and his conspicuous consumption – "he's the humblest man then living on planet earth" (I'm assuming BTW that a later editor included that note). He is called to a kind of family meeting...all three siblings to the Tabernacle.

God defends the envied person. "I do INDEED speak to Moses in a unique way... I have chosen Him – he is My friend... and your argument is really with ME... not Moses..." See? Envy is an argument with God and the way He has unfairly arranged the world.

And God then withdraws from the siblings and Miriam...so proud of her light skin...it's as if God says, "You want WHITE? You got it!" (she is leprous, white as snow) – kind of like Cain who gets a mark on his body whatever that was.

And Aaron has to acknowledge, "Yeah...Moses does have a special relationship to God..." and Aaron has to face his own jealousy and call it "sin" and then ask for Moses' prayers. And Moses does pray ...but God says, "Miriam has to feel this...she wanted to be in an exclusive 'whites-only' club...so let her be in a club SOOOOO exclusive that there's only ONE member... she'll be exiled like Cain (in that first recorded sibling rivalry)... but...the whole nation will wait for her because I will restore her.

And of course there would eventually come a Man more humble than Moses...a perfectly humble Man. He, Jesus Christ, would speak with God face to face in a way that even Moses had not known – in fact Jesus Christ IS the face (Heb:"panim") of God. (2 Cor 4.6)

And Jesus Christ, the unique Mediator, the better and perfect Mediator humbled Himself from the highest place to the lowest: God became a foot-washer (Phil 2) and He too was envied by the religious people of his day... They saw Him dance with God...Lord of the Dance...and live in what looked like effortless, enjoyable obedience...and they hated Him and put Him to death...out of envy.

But Jesus Christ was living, was dancing, was obeying for nasty envious people like me...and you...He was living the content life that I have failed to live. He died the shameful death that I deserved to die... He went outside the city ... He was exiled for me. His face was covered in blood and spit for ME.

And I – T.J. the discontented, jealous person... I am counted beautiful...Jesus Christ, the humble has clothed me with His beauty and I am counted BY GOD THE FATHER...I am counted faithful and humble because of Him. God has come to my defense just like he defended Moses.

And because of His life, death and resurrection on MY BEHALF...Jesus Christ opens up the possibility of New Life, a way of life that is secure – I have the applause of heaven; I have God’s approval so I don’t need YOURS (don’t get me wrong – I like to be affirmed and appreciated and pat on the back – but to the degree that I am believing the Gospel I don’t NEED it, don’t crave it). Recognition from people is no longer the source of my life and well-being.

And if I am fixated on God’s approving voice in Jesus Christ (resting and receiving that) I can even rejoice when my rival succeeds. The Tonya Harding in me can stand up and cheer when Nancy Kerrigan pulls off that flawless “Triple Salchow”(jump) and I can just rejoice to see it... My praise comes from another Source...an infinitely BETTER SOURCE... the voice of God, Our Father, speaks, “T.J., YOU ARE, in Jesus Christ, you are MY BELOVED SON...in you I am well pleased...”

And when I trust that – I can repent of my thirst for approval from people...I can stop crushing my loved ones with my own needy CRAVING for approval.

The apparent unfairness of life (where some people are born with a silver spoon in their mouth and some with a plastic spoon...some get lots of talent and some are very limited) I can say, “I don’t always get it Father...but I thank YOU for defending me...for loving and saving me...” In Christ, I have every spiritual blessing – there’s nothing left for me to envy.

Out of that security comes humility... and a willingness to repent, forgive and celebrate God’s goodness and beauty wherever (IN WHOM EVER) it shows up. I can stop “noticing”, stop resenting, stop comparing. I can rest. What a relief.

The Communion

11.6.16

We are obligated to point out a kind of warning issued by the Apostle Paul in First Corinthians – if you are not connected to the Body, the Church...if you're not a member of some congregation that you regularly attend (this church of another one)... you should not take the Bread and Wine... that's at least part of the warning... please read it...and please read our statement on page 11 in the bulletin.

The Source of the envy-free life...the way to cut the deep roots of envy and live in contentment is to feel secure in who you are.

Before Jesus Christ washed the disciples' feet, we read these words in John CH 13 – “Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God, got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself”. (3-4)

Then He washed their feet.

When we know that God accepts us...when we have a sense of it and we feel secure in the LOVE of the God who spared no expense to save us and have us, THEN WE CAN TAKE OFF GARMENTS...our pretenses and we can serve people...

True humility and contentment come NOT from low self-esteem or trying to be self-effacing or servant-like... IT COMES FROM SECURITY.

This Supper is meant to communicate grace and security to us...here Jesus Christ and His benefits are COMMUNICATED to us. Take and eat...digest the new identity that is YOURS as a chosen, adopted child of the King...that's what cuts the roots of envy and THAT'S the engine of true humility that enables you to stop comparing...and start really loving.

Ask God to give you that sense of security and embrace as you come...Let's pause in silence.