

## Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B

Numbers 11:25-29 and Mark 9:38-43, 45, 47-48

When I worked for the Diocese of Scranton, I vetted programs for parishes. Once I reviewed a Protestant grief program a parishioner was recommending. All seemed fine: modern psychological understanding and a compassionate Christian perspective. However, tucked in toward the end was a session proclaiming that the grieving person had done something to deserve God's punishment. Needless to say, I advised not to use the program. An overwhelming number of people offer their perspective on God and it is not always clear whom to follow. We can choose Twitter feeds and books by Pope Francis, Bishop Barron, Richard Rohr, Brené Brown, Jordan Peterson, Oprah Winfrey, even Bernadette Rudolph. How should we choose?

In Numbers, the Israelites travel the desert for forty years. They had been freed from slavery and entered into the covenant, but they had much to learn. Our passage takes place in the midst of everyone complaining about the monotony of manna, that delicious, daily gift. Moses says, "You gotta be kidding me!" and begs God for help. God appoints seventy elders to become prophets. This was done formally by Moses and Aaron, head priest, outside the camp at the tent that housed the Ark of the Covenant. Recall that a prophet is simply one who calls others to covenant faithfulness.

A further question then arises: whose prophecies are worth listening to? Numbers assures us that we can find true prophets ordained by formal religious establishments and "in the camp," among ourselves. When some question this, Moses replies, "Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets!" Maybe then Moses would not have to deal with people complaining about free food. The passage assures us today that people besides priests and bishops can be prophets. The yardstick for a prophet's credentials is this: are they reminding us to be faithful to the covenant? Of course, this means we need to know what the covenant says and be vigilant in testing prophets but truth can come from anyone's mouth.

This frees us from a few things. First, we are not bound to follow only ordained leaders. As Dorothy Day said, "I never expected much of bishops... It is the saints that keep appearing all through history who keep things going." Secondly, Nm 11 widens our constricted view of God's creativity and mercy. God's goodness can be found everywhere, so we must look for it everywhere. Third, we are free to see Christians from other denominations as partners. Books and curricula that focus on proving that the Catholic perspective is the best are not good spiritual food. The covenant does not call us to superiority and defensiveness but to imitate God's steadfast love and mercy.

Similarly in the gospel, one of the official Twelve apostles, John, tells Jesus, "Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us." Notice John says that the person driving out demons did so in *your* (i.e. Jesus') name, while John's concern is that the person does not follow *us*. Jesus responds that the work of removing evil in his name is not the same as faithfulness to church leaders. Jesus wants us to ponder any resistance we might feel about this teaching. Jesus asks us to develop a perspective on faith that allows for grey areas. While bishops and priests do God's work and the Catholic Church carries the treasure of the Gospel through the ages, Jesus is also feeding our Protestant brothers and sisters and doing good through them. As in Nm 11, God wants us to know that God works beyond the boundaries of what we can understand.

Jesus reinforces the dangers of exclusivity by reminding us that it harms those who are spiritually young as well as ourselves. If we teach children, people in RCIA or our loved ones that God's merciful power is limited to legitimate Catholics, we do serious harm to them. If we do or watch anything that limits the validity of God's boundless power, we do ourselves great harm. Jesus instructs us to amputate those aspects of our life so urgent is the matter. Too drastic? Why?

- ❖ How do you feel about those who follow God in a way that is different from your own? Where do you need God's help in expanding your view?
- ❖ How do you decide whose perspective on God is worth listening to? Does it have anything to do with your baptismal promises?