

It's Just Not Fair

Numbers 11:24-30

So Moses went out and told the people the words of the LORD; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent. Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again. Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, "My lord Moses, stop them!" But Moses said to him, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!" And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

Joshua is just one of the most amazing characters in the Bible. He was an absolute workhorse. Joshua was that kid who worked harder than anyone else his age. He was more disciplined. More organized. He showed up earlier and stayed later than anyone else, and pretty soon, his hard work paid off. As a young man Joshua was picked to lead some Israelites into one of the first battles after they left Egypt. The Amalekites attacked them at a place called Rephidim, and Joshua lead them into battle and handed the Amalekites their tails. But this was only the beginning. Pretty soon, Joshua, son of Nun, was noticed by the most important Israelite of all- pretty soon none other than Moses had his eye on him. And just like that, not only did Joshua become one of Moses' chosen, but he became Moses' personal assistant, his number two guy. When Moses climbed up Mt. Sinai wrapped in thick darkness to receive the ten commandments? Everyone else in the camp wouldn't even look at the mountain they were so terrified, but Joshua actually climbed up with him. It was Joshua Moses picked to be one of the spies into the promised land. And it was Joshua who eventually took over Moses, leading the

people across the Jordan river, 'fitting' the battle at Jericho, and even having an entire book of the Bible named after him.

But life wasn't always beer and skittles for Joshua. For starters there's his name- his background. In scripture, Joshua is never just Joshua. He's always being identified with his father, this guy named Nun. In the Bible he's always Joshua, son of Nun. He never gets to be just plain ol' Joshua. Now in English Nun doesn't sound so bad, but in Aramaic Nun actually means 'fish'. Joshua is quite literally a real son of fish. And apparently that sounds as bad in Aramaic as it does in English. Nun was not a high status name in those days- it was a name associated with the poorest Israelites. Scholars believe that ol' "Fishy", his father, never even made it out of Egypt- Nun lived and died as a slave, never knowing freedom.

So it's not like he was born to power- he earned it. He had to fight for every scrap of it.

And I think that's what makes the story today so painful. The Hebrew name for the book of Numbers is 'b-midbar', meaning in the wilderness. And that's exactly where the people are. The people are in the wilderness. And the set up to the story is that God has given people the miracle of manna in the wilderness- this bread like stuff just covers the ground all over the place. And at first everyone's like, "Hey manna! This is great." But you can guess what happens. I mean manna is pretty good on Monday. And it's not so bad on Tuesday- you were still pretty hungry. But on Wednesday, well, you're starting to get used to it. And by Thursday, they're like, "Does manna...um...does it come in any other flavors? I mean, just asking." And by Friday they're like, "You know, Egypt wasn't really all that bad. We were slaves- but at least we had meat instead of all this stupid manna." And so the people are grumbling and grumbling

about how bad everything, and it gets so bad Moses whines about it to God. And then God tells Moses to get all the elders together- gather all 70 elders together.

Now if it were me. I would have been nervous. You grumble, you whine, and then God tells Moses to gather everyone together in one place. And they won't tell you why? I'm thinkin' this is when you hot wire a camel and get out of there, but they all just do what Moses says. He tells everyone to gather in the big tent, the place where they worship. And they all get in there, all 70 elders, and the most amazing thing happens. God actually comes down out of the clouds, the text says, and, like he's ladling punch out of a bowl, he scoops out some of the spirit he's given to Moses, and God sets it, rests parts of the spirit onto each of the elders. God just passes around some of the ABUNDANT spirit that Moses has been given.

And the effect is amazing. Every single one of those elders begins preaching. Each of them, the text says, begins to just spontaneously to prophesy, to speak the word of God. It reminds me of the preaching conference I go to nearly every year, the Festival of Homiletics. It's just day after day of amazing preacher after amazing preacher, and you just get to sit there and bask in it, soaking it all up, thinking how much of this can I steal before it really becomes plagiarism. 😊

Only not everybody shows up. And this makes it even more like a preaching conference. While most of the people get to where they're supposed to go, a couple of guys manage to completely blank on the whole event. Two guys, Eldad and Medad, these two jokers, well they were away from home, they're away from Egypt, and they're just feeling their freedom. They find some bar somewhere, and they just start drinking like they're in college again. And they keep saying, you know, we really ought to go to bed- we've got to get up for this thing

tomorrow- but as they get progressively more and more tanked, the importance of this gathering becomes more and more remote. And so finally, barely able to stand, when the bartender finally kicks them out, they weave back home with nowhere near enough time to sleep all this off. And so the next morning, when everyone else is meeting and receiving the Holy Spirit and preaching- these guys are groaning in bed, hungover, and trying to remember if they did or said anything REALLY embarrassing. And THEN, when Eldad and Medad finally do pull their sorry behinds out of bed and start scraping what feels like bear hair off of their tongue as they brush their teeth, they begin to feel something really strange come over them both. They both begin to feel the Spirit of God fall upon them, just like it fell over the others, and they begin to prophesy, they also begin to preach. God actually gives them some of the spirit, too- even though they didn't even make it to the gathering. My guess is they both offered the finest sermons on temperance ever heard in the land

And Joshua- I mean could there be ANYTHING worse? Here's Joshua, who has done everything right. He's worked hard all his life. He's risen above his humble beginnings. He's been careful. He's played by the rules. And he's advanced- he's gone nearly as far as you can go. It's bad enough that God takes some of the spirit from Moses and shares it with the 70 elders. But for God to share the spirit with THESE two? With Eldad and Medad? The drunk tank twins who couldn't even follow the most basic of orders? To share it with THEM? Are you kidding me? That's just not even fair!

So, I'm feeling sympathetic for Joshua this morning. I am. And I think you should to because you and I, folks who live in and around Tualatin- honestly we've got a lot more Joshua

in us than Eldad and Medad. Two weeks ago I was invited back to Princeton to participate in this conversation about the future of the church. My old mentor Stacy Johnson corralled a bunch of people who thought were doing interesting things in the church. And it was really interesting to meet some of these people and hear about their congregations. A lot of these folks there did NOT have Joshua congregations- they have Eldad and Medad congregations, they had people who you just don't normally see in a church. To fit in with these folks these pastors are easy to spot- they're all covered in tats and piercings and have crazy hair or no hair at all. And none of them worshipped on Sunday mornings, of course- they said their people didn't even get up until past noon on Sundays. These pastors were shepherds of prodigal sons and daughters, Eldads and Medads, and I'm glad they're out there.

But a few of us who were there- the ones in the khaki's and pressed shirts, our congregations aren't like that. Our congregations are full of Joshuas more than Eldads and Medads. Most folks who choose to live in and around Tualatin- we're a fairly responsible bunch. We have our rough edges, sure- but comparatively speaking we value hard work and responsibility. We play by the rules and have a strong sense of fairness. We get up in the morning and try and do the right thing most of the time. And we think about the future- a LOT. We plan for it. We worry about it. Especially when it comes to our kids- we worry about our kids more than anything- about what schools they'll go to, how to pay for it, and whether they'll be able to find a good job when they're done. The Eldads and Medads- they just don't fret about the future like we do. They're just going with the flow. It's how they're wired. But people with a little more Joshua in them- we worry. We do. It's who we are.

Now there's a good side to all of this. All this hard work we do- it often pays off just like it did for Joshua. A lot of us have found ourselves in really stable places in our lives. We live in safe neighborhoods. We have access to health care. Even if the economy continues to hurt us, we are still incredibly wealthy compared to many parts of the world.

But there's also a not so good side to these Joshua hearts of ours. There's very much a not so good side. The less good side is that we're so used to working our tails off for every inch of progress, we're so used to things coming with a price tag- we're so used to this that sometimes we think that everything in life is like this. Even love. Even grace.

The text says Joshua was one of Moses' chosen men. Chosen. Joshua was picked, he was valued by Moses, because he worked his tail off and earned it. Moses didn't flip a coin. He didn't just choose anybody. He picked the best. And the Joshuas inside of us- we're so used to playing this kind of game and earning people's good opinions- well it only makes sense that sometimes we think everything has to be earned- even love and grace.

The hardest thing about being a Joshua is believing in the deepest part of us that we have to achieve a certain amount in the day to be worthy love, and, because we're critical and exacting people, nearly always whispering to ourselves that we've fallen short. Now, none of us would say we believe you can earn love if you asked us, but inside- inside we keep this running tally of every accomplishment and every failure. More highly calibrated than a Swiss time piece, we examine ourselves and how we're using our time- mortified of seeming lazy or indulgent. And we compare ourselves with one another CONSTANTLY. We are forever deciding whether we're worth anything by how we look in comparison to this or that person. Like, I may not be perfect, but thank God at least I'm doing better than he is- or definitely than she is over there.

Nearly every minute of every day we Joshua's are working our fingers to the bone- and not only to save for retirement and pay the bills, but also to seem worthy, to seem worthy enough to love.

Only it doesn't work like this. Love. Grace. Heck life itself. These are not things we can earn or deserve. Love, grace, and life- these have already been given by God. They aren't earned, but received. And all this time we spend working for love and hustling for grace- it actually keeps us from receiving, from reveling in what we already have. And worse, our appreciation of hard work and sense of fairness- we actually place ourselves in opposition to God's grace when we encounter God lavishing God's love and grace on someone we don't think deserves it. Did you hear that? We set ourselves in opposition to God, we make ourselves enemies of God- when we see someone receiving unmerited grace that they do not deserve and instead of being happy for them we grumble to ourselves that it just isn't fair.

See, this is what happens to Joshua in the text this morning. This is the terrible turn he makes. After all that hard, grueling, work Joshua put in- when God ladles the spirit on to those 70 elders, Joshua doesn't rejoice. He grits his teeth. And when God even dishes grace out on those two losers who couldn't even be bothered to show up when they were supposed to, Eldad and Medad- he's infuriated. "Make them stop," he yells to Moses. Make God take away the gift he gave them. They aren't worth it. They don't deserve it.

As if anyone does.

But these Joshua hearts of ours, so used to working hard, so used to earning our keep and paying our way- they are so very, very bad at receiving, resting, and relishing in the love that's already ours, already ours, simply for being God's own.

Ten years ago this May I was at another gathering in Princeton- a significantly larger one. It was my graduation from seminary. It was an absolutely incredible time. Classes were over. Spring was in full force. And we were just absolutely full of life. We held a giant bbq at our place for all of our friends and put up a huge banner that read: Welcome to the Reprobate Round Up, reprobate being Calvin's term for the...uh...heavenly challenged, we'll say. And the graduation itself was amazing. It's held every year at Princeton chapel- this ginormous gothic cathedral that makes you feel both tiny and incredibly important all at the same time. We had our robes and Master's hoods on. The Ph.D students and professors had on their full regalia. It was at night, which was awesome, and for a present Melissa had given me a flask engraved with "If They Ask, Tell 'Em It's Holy Water" on the outside. I will neither confirm nor deny that I was carrying said flask full of Oban Single Malt tucked away in my pocket. I wish I could deny that after the graduation my neighbor and best friend, John Semmes, drove his Ford Explorer through the married student apartment sidewalks honking his horn like a maniac. It was a time of just intense relief and happiness.

But. But. There was also some news I had been waiting for that night. All that year I had worked on a senior thesis- what turned out to be a hundred plus page senior thesis on the combining the thoughts of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas on the presence and absence of God. To say that I had poured all my heart, mind, and soul into this thing would be an understatement. And Princeton likes to reward hard work. The major divisions of the school, theology, practical theology, old testament, new testament, and so on- they each offered an

award for the best thesis each year. The award was \$10,000.00. And there was only one other guy had entered a thesis in the area of theology. One other guy.

The thing about this guy- you never saw him. He kind of showed up to classes now and then, but mostly not. And when he did, he really didn't have anything helpful to say. Honestly he just seemed like a waste of space to me- I didn't even know why they let him stay. So, I'm sitting there, and President Gillespie is going through all of the remarks, and we have the speech, and we're all just going to graduate and be the best little pastors the world has ever seen, and all the while, I'm waiting for them to call out the winners of these awards- feeling pretty dang confident. And finally, the moment arrives. They start going through the different departments. And they come to theology. One of the MANY guys with combovers at Princeton is standing up there at the podium announcing the thesis awards- and he announces the winner for theology, and my name is not the name he calls. It's the slug. It's this other guy.

Now a little disappointment, OK. Fair enough. But I'll be honest- what I felt went beyond that. I was angry. It was not fair. And it got in the way of that night for me. I mean really, that night I'm graduating from Princeton seminary. And I was given a scholarship to do so the entire three years. My incredible family has gathered and is out there supporting me. Melis and I didn't even yet know what joy was in store for us with one just one munchkin but THREE. I mean at that moment I have to just be the luckiest man on earth. And yet, the only thing I could think about for most of that night was how it wasn't fair the theology award went to THAT guy. I mean he didn't even show up to class most of the time.

Well, it's taken 10 years, but I can honestly say Moses' words to Joshua finally begin to make sense to me: "Are you jealous? Would that all God's people were prophets, and that the Lord would pour out his spirit on ALL."

My fellow Joshuas and Joshuettes. I'm grateful to be among people that value hard work. I like living in a place full of responsible people who will go the extra mile. I love Tualatin- I don't have much interest in a congregation full of Eldads and Medads...honestly I just really don't want to have to get a tattoo. But, but- my prayer is that God may give us the wisdom, to know we can't earn what we already have. Give us the eyes to see all that we have and not to waste time counting everything we've lost. And give us receiving spirits, knowing that every moment we hustle and strive after God's love is just one more moment we aren't resting in it and radiating it the world. **Amen.**

1. Feeling for Joshua this week- his name
2. His overcoming and climbing
3. But then the story this week
4. Feeling for him means I'm feeling for all of us. We're more Joshua than Eldad and Medad
5. Good side to Joshua and bad side- earning love; bitterness at seeing God gift others
6. That's what happens to Joshua- he can't stand to see those others be gifted. They don't deserve it. Like anyone does.

7. Graduation night for me and finally now understanding Moses' words
8. Glad to be in Tualatin among the Joshuas. But may we have the wisdom to know we can't earn what we already have; and every moment we spent hustling after grace is another moment we miss enjoying and sharing what is already ours just for being God's own.