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Numbers 11:24-30 & John 20:19-23
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Trickster Spirit

Where does authority come from?

When faced with a difficult question, how should I live my life? What college should I go to? Who do I vote for? What hill do I die on, and what is not worth fighting about? Who do I love? Who are my enemies? On Palm Sunday, I spoke about how the crowd chose Jesus over the religious leaders and Rome. That sermon was about what human authorities we listen to, the people and institutions that shape how we see the world, and what we are faithful to. Today I have a thornier mystery. What is the Holy Spirit, and how is it different from human authority?

Please pray with me. Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing to you—our source of life and creative spirit.

What is the right way to make decisions as a church community?

Is it local or regional clergy providing leadership and vision? Is it committees evaluating an idea from all angles, getting lots of people's eyes on potential ideas? Is it that volunteer with a good idea, told to run with it? Do decisions stem from meetings, with the burden of creativity only on the elected members? If the whole congregation is involved, how? Is it ordered or organic? Are we waiting for permission or invited to share?

These past few weeks I have enjoyed being in Dr. Enns class. One thing that struck me was his listing church bureaucracy as one reason why people are done with church. How might today's scripture bring an antidote to churches in the United States? What transformation is Pentecost inviting us to consider?

In Numbers, Mosas is saying that the work of carrying all these people is too much for him. So God tells him he does not need to do everything on his own. Collect 70 elders and I will take some of the power of God's spirit, give it to them, and they will prophesize. However, unbeknownst to Mosas, two elders, Eladad and Medad, also received Moses's spirit and were prophesizing without authorization.

The issue is that these elders were supposed to help shoulder the load, but in a controlled, ordered way. But God's trickster spirit moves in mysterious ways, through recognized authority and through other ways it choses.

I wonder if the disciples remembered this text when they were locked up in their room in Jerusalem? Moses may have greeted the trickster nature of the Holy Spirit with relief, but the religious and political leaders of Jesus's day were scared of this good news. Maybe it was because Jesus loved the wrong people, eating with sinners and tax collectors. Maybe it was his economic parables of the rich getting nothing and workers getting a fair wage. Maybe it was simply that Jesus did not rule in an ordered way. He did not bring an army to conquer, he was not born into a wealthy family. Jesus was like Eladad and Medad, prophesizing in the camp.

Yet, the imposter Jesus passes his spirit into the disciples, telling them that they were in charge of forgiveness and retaining sins. (That sentence is a sermon unto itself)

Today we are inheritors of this trickster spirit. A spirit that colors outside the lines, that works in ordered and chaotic ways. The trickster spirit cannot be controlled or restrained. It is the wild breath of God, a wind blowing over hills and valleys. The Holy Spirit is a force of nature.

Today we honor the blessing of taking initiative. Hospitality became a need as we transitioned from online church, so Paul suggested a coffee table. People honor the earth and their bodies by biking to church, so Jerry suggested a bike rack at the back of church. The art gallery, supportive fellowship, Sunday classes, the PIM stage in the fellowship hall, and so many beautiful things in our church started as ideas from you the congregation. Yes. These ideas were approved by the proper committees, but they started in your minds.

Today I feel challenged to see that spirit alive and well within each one of you. The power to prophesize, or in modern language have authority, is within each one of you. That is the scary blessing of Pentecost.