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Numbers 11.4-6, 10-16, 24-29
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Carrying Church Together

Do you remember doing group projects in school? frustration with group projects is burned into my mind from many experiences with groups that never met up, with that one member that surfed off the work of others, and yes, those group projects where I ended up with all the work.

I wonder if this how Moses is feeling about the group project of getting the Israelites through the wilderness. Moses has God, who freed them from Egypt with many miracles. Moses has his brother Aaron who spoke for him in Egypt and is now his high priest. But when the hungry horde comes to Moses, asking for meat and spices like they enjoyed in Egypt, it looks like Moses has been stuck with the majority of this particular group project.

We're kind of dropped in the middle of a story. Basically what's happened up until now, is Moses and the Israelites have been traveling in the wilderness, they've just left Sinai and have been living off of the abundance of God's mana that falls upon the earth daily. Each day, they get up, collect enough for the day and no more, because if the Israelites are greedy and take too much then there may not be enough for everyone that day the mana will rot the next day. However, now the Israelites are thinking back to Egypt with rose-colored glasses, remembering meat, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic. And honestly, I can empathize with the people, I love to put garlic in everything I eat. Little delicacies can go a long way to making a trip through the wilderness more bearable. However, by complaining to Moses and expecting him to do everything for them, they themselves have become unbearable. Warranted or not, Moses has had it up to here with these complaining people.

“He asked the Lord, “Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their ancestors?” Numbers 11:11-12

Did they even know how horrible they had it in Egypt? Did they forget that Moses is only alive because of the profound courage of some Egyptian midwives? Did they forget that the Egyptians were ruthless with them and put them under heavy forced labor and taxes? Do they want to be placed back under the yoke of slavery in Egypt? I believe that Moses is furious that they want to give up everything they've gained for the sake of food. Ironic how the Israelite's desire to take on the burden of slavery, mirrors Moses's own complaint that the people are a burden too heavy for him to bear.

Pastor Caley. You are about to take on a heavy burden. Some Christians have symbolized this burden with a stole, which I wore last Sunday to symbolize the yoke of Christ. And while Caley follows the Anabaptist tendency to not wear one, today his ordination represents him putting on the yoke of Christ, that much like a beast of burden, we ministers join in the group project of plowing the fields of church. Our congregations behind us on the plow, pointing us to rich soil as we ministers dig deep, lift with our legs, and guide the plow forward.

And we may be tempted to, like Moses, tell God this group project is too much, a burden that is too much to bear. And Caley, it is true that there will be hard days ahead. Days when the hangry horde cry out that they want to return to Egypt, return to the way things have been. While the way of Egypt may have tasted good for some of us, it was a church of exploitation and hierarchy. But Caley, I have some good news for you.

After Moses complained bitterly to God, God told Moses, "bring me seventy of Israel's elders and organizers who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people" (Num 11:16). So Moses gathered his fellow leaders and God took some of the "power of the spirit" that was in Moses and distributed it to Moses's fellow leaders.

Today, we shall do a little of this. Neither Caley, Barb, Juan or me are alone in this task of leadership. We are joined by all the elders, by the whole congregation in this great group project that is church. Today this cloud of witnesses will surround and embrace Caley, will commit to searching the scriptures, speaking truth, and support him in bringing hope, healing, and wholeness to the world.

Unfortunately for us, God does not take the burden away and just does everything by Godself. Instead, God provides others to share the burden. Another example of the old saying, without God humans cannot act, but without humans God will not act. God is not going to take over this group project so that we can play soccer in the quad. We've all got to do our part.

But if church is a group project, how do we do it well? How do we keep from being like those complaining Israelites or that one person who did help with writing the discussion section of our experiment on the distribution of baptisia Leucantha in the prairie?

Have you ever played the human knot game? It's a game where you form a circle, and reach across the circle to someone else's hand that is not beside you. Then the group tries to untangle the knot so that you are all holding hands in a ring. It's not an easy game and the hardest part is usually figuring out how to get started. But at some point someone says, Peter, walk through these hands. Then once someone takes leadership, another joins in and says, yes yes, and next Ruth can step through here. And we keep discovering together how to take the next steps, at times leading and other times following. But always depending on each other and serving one

another. At times, we won't know what step to take and how to get out of this messy knot that is church together. But we'll keep working at it, spinning, flowing, and walking through one another, untangling the knotted cord that is all of us. Tied together by the cross and all priests and elders of the people of God.