



Sharing the Spirit

By

The Reverend Dr. John M. Willingham

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First Lesson | Numbers 11:10-17,24-25

Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the Lord became very angry, and Moses was displeased. So Moses said to the Lord, “Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom as a wet nurse carries a nursing child, to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors’? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me, saying, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery.”

So the Lord said to Moses, “Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting and have them take their place there with you. I will come

down and speak with you there, and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself. So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord, and he gathered seventy of the 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.

Second Lesson | Mark 6:7-13

He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff: no bread, no bag, no money in their belts, but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” So they went out and proclaimed that all should

repent. They cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Sermon

Her name was Mimi. At the time of her death two months ago, she had been a member of the Doylestown Presbyterian Church for 76 years. I was her pastor for two decades. Mimi had this gentle and quiet warmth. She was quick with a smile and always had a kind word. She sang in the choir, volunteered in the nursery, and served one term on the Session. It was in that capacity one night 16 years ago when Mimi's words made all the difference.

Recognizing the need for significant campus work, in the years prior to that meeting, the Session had hired an architect and created a Facilities Task Force. After extensive congregational input, a Master Plan emerged that envisioned several phases. The officers approved a committee to oversee the renovations, the design for a pedestrian bridge, and a contractor. The

congregation authorized the launch of a capital campaign, the Session approved four mission projects to be funded by it, too, and then, despite the worst recession in a generation, the members pledged a total nearly three times the amount of the operating budget. While the details are certainly different from what happened here during the last decade, the process likely sounds familiar.

Thus, on that January night in 2010, the Session had gathered to make its recommendation as to what phase of the project would be the first one and how much to borrow. That second step was something that, for all practical purposes, the congregation had never done before and certainly not to the scale being considered. As the officers began to talk about what to recommend to their fellow members, a sense of uneasiness filled the room. Some were troubled by the unknown increased operating costs of a larger building. Others thought the church should scale back its project since there was no definitive construction bid yet. Others still expressed concern about whether there would be sustained enthusiasm for multiple capital campaigns or if the project would cut

into giving for day-to-day ministry. All of the questions were valid, but as they were named one-by-one, the anxiety in that room grew.

It was then that Mimi, someone who rarely spoke in Session meetings, raised her hand. When I called on her, Mimi said: “God has brought us to this point. We are ready. With God’s help we can do it. It’s time to begin.” With those gentle words of faith, tension around the table dissolved. A motion was made for the starting point of the project and a maximum for the construction loan. Weeks later, the congregation endorsed both recommendations 3-to-1.

I thought about Mimi when I began to ponder our two Scripture readings for this morning. Neither of them talks about borrowing money or an expanded church campus, of course, yet both do speak of times leaders from the past acted in ways that made a difference.

The first lesson recalls a day when Moses, the great leader of the Israelites, was emotionally spent. After two years at Mount Sinai, the nation had set out for the Promised Land. While there

must have been great excitement as they set out on that journey, things quickly took a turn. Prior to our reading, the narrator tells of how the people were distressed about some undefined “misfortunes.” God gets upset with the people; the Israelites cry out to Moses, who intervenes on their behalf. That crisis passes, but soon thereafter new complaints return. A small group described as “the rabble” voices another concern; they are tired of the manna God has provided during their journey and want some meat in their diet. They even misremember their time of Egyptian slavery as including a kind of endless buffet. Our text begins at that point.

“Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents.” God is again described as angry, and this time, Moses vents his frustration. “Why have you treated your servant so badly?” he cries out to God. “Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all this people on me?” He asks where he could possibly find enough meat for the people who number close to 600,000 by this point. “If this is the way you are going to treat me, put me to death at once—if

I have found favor in your sight—and do not let me see my misery.” God listens but responds with a different plan.

“Gather for me seventy of the elders of Israel,” the Lord says, “whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tent of meeting and have them take their place there with you. I will come down and talk with you there, and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them and they shall bear the burden of the people along with you so that you will not bear it all by yourself.” Moses announces that plan to the masses and then as we read God “took some of the spirit that was on Moses and put it on the seventy elders”

Jesus modeled a similar approach. Three of the gospels tell of a moment when he sends out the twelve disciples on a mission without him. It wasn’t on their first day together, but after a time when they had learned a great deal through his words and deeds. In a wise leadership move to prepare them for the time he is no longer present, he dispatches them out on their own.

Mark records that Jesus sent them in pairs and gave them authority over unclean spirits. He recounts instructions Jesus gave as to what they are to wear and take on that journey, where to stay, and how to react if persons refused to hear them. The account concludes: “So they went out and cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.” They, too, had a share in God’s spirit. That happens here, too.

One of the joys I experience each day as your Interim Senior Pastor is the incredibly talented group of women and men who serve here as pastors and staff, as elders, deacons, and trustees. When joined with an amazing number of gifted individuals who volunteer their time to carry out the ministry of this church, you model what God and Jesus sought in leaders long ago.

Both of our Scripture lessons identify that characteristic, yet the reading from Numbers includes another piece. The narrator says that after the people complained and Moses lamented his lot, God “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.” God did as promised, and it helped, as from that moment forward Moses faithfully continued in his role as leader of the people. That doesn’t mean that he never grew tired or frustrated again, but it provided the relief he sought.

Yet after telling of that act of shared leadership, our text concludes, “But they did not do so again.” In other words, those elders helped Moses one time before the work fell back on him.

Just to state the obvious, that pattern is not one we seek to emulate at BMPC! Instead, we rely upon the fact that our staff and officers, pastors and volunteers share in the spirit repeatedly in shaping and undergirding the vibrant ministries of this church. Still, that single act of help by 70 elders 3500 years ago reveals that the church also relies upon other moments of faithfulness by its people. Those everyday occasions when a share of God’s spirit is apparent.

Jon Walton, the former pastor of First Presbyterian Church in NYC, once told the story in a sermon about visiting an older woman in the congregation who had been hospitalized with severe and

undiagnosed stomach pain. Walton had been advised that this woman, a person of deep faith, might appreciate hearing some Psalms read, so he took his prayer book with him and made his way to the hospital. In her room, she seemed happy to see him, though she was weak and faint in voice. They chatted for a while, and then Walton read some familiar words: “God is our refuge and strength...I lift up mine eyes to the hills...The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.’ Walton then described what happened next.

“She closed her eyes and allowed the words to seep into the familiar places of her soul. After I finished reading, she told me that the doctor had visited her a little earlier and explained what her diagnosis was. ‘Lymphoma,’ he said. ‘Rather advanced.’ But she was feeling relieved because it meant that there would not need to be any surgery in her weakened condition, and she was thankful for the good care that she was getting...She hoped to go home soon and spend her last days there.

“She smiled and went on, ‘I wish you had been here earlier. The doctor came to see me with three handsome young

interns in tow. They told me their names, and each one checked me over, and then the doctor said to me, ‘Maybe you would like to share with these young men something that they should know as doctors, especially in light of your faith, and what I’ve just told you.’ She said, ‘I hardly knew what to say. It seemed like it was so important. Here I was in this bed, and I was supposed to say something that these young doctors could remember. I didn’t think I had anything to say, so I just said, ‘Somehow, I trust that whatever happens to me I will be in God’s hands, and that gives me hope. Whatever happens, I will be all right.’

“She looked at [Walton] and said, ‘I wish you’d been here. You would have said it so much better than I could.’ And [he] looked at her and I said, ‘No, I couldn’t. I couldn’t have said it any better at all.’” (Long, Thomas G. *Accompany Them with Singing. The Christian Funeral*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

What is the spirit that God took from Moses and shared with 70 elders long ago? We aren’t really sure. What was the nature of that gift Jesus placed upon the Twelve centuries later as they set out?

We have the Biblical narratives, of course, but precise details are scant.

Equally important is wondering what it looks like when some of God’s spirit is shared with you and me. We can’t define that with precision either, as for some it will be the spirit of bearing witness to our faith in the face of a troubling diagnosis, while for others it will be a spirit of approachability. For one person it might be the spirit of compassion while for someone else it is the gift of seeing the big picture. For a particular believer it will be the spirit of generosity or serving behind the scenes or the spirit of hospitality. Whatever form it takes, it is a critical part of our life as Christians including those occasions when we don’t even know we’re doing it.

Do you remember my opening story about an elder named Mimi? There’s a postscript.

A few years after that Session meeting when her faithful words made all the difference, after the renovation work had concluded and a third capital campaign helped retire the debt, the congregation had a luncheon where we thanked the members for their sustained giving over

a decade. As part of my comments, I recounted the story of that elder who had moved the project forward with her clear message of faithful confidence. I didn't share the elder's name.

Mimi was at the lunch, and afterward she said to me, "That was such a wonderful story about the difference one elder had made." Her tone was not one of false modesty or seeking a compliment, but rather the sort of kind and humble observation she had made many times over the years. When I replied, "Mimi, you do know that the story was about you, don't you?" that gentle woman, whose mind was clear and vibrant, replied, "I don't remember that moment at all."

A share of God's spirit. May you and I continue to accept and use our share, too, time after time, whether we remember it or not.