

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost 18 (Proper 21)

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29

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Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

4The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, “If only we had meat to eat! 5We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; 6but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at.”

10Moses heard the people weeping throughout their families, all at the entrances of their tents. Then the LORD became very angry, and Moses was displeased. 11So 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? 12Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them, that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a sucking child,’ to the land that you promised on oath to their ancestors? 13Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they come weeping to me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ 14I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. 15If 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.”

16So 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. 24So 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. 25Then 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. 26Two 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. 27And a young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." 28And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, "My lord Moses, stop them!" 29But 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!"

DIAGNOSIS: When the Family Fails

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *"I'm tired of these whining kids!"*

Moses leads the Israelites in the wilderness. Moses could just as easily be a parent in our world trying to lead her children in the wilderness of an inhospitable world. Like whining children who cannot have what they want, the Israelites complain to Moses about their daily diet of manna. Like selfish children griping to their parents, they long for "the good old days" of life in Egypt when they could have what they wanted. They could dine on meat and a variety of other delicious vegetables. Of course, their selective memory conveniently forgets that they

were miserable slaves.

Moses is fed-up with being a babysitter for these selfish brats. Their petulant selfishness is magnified when they complain again to Moses about two unauthorized prophets, Eldad and Medad, who were not on the official “elder roster” and yet had the nerve to “cut in line” and speak “out of turn.” It was not fair. These two had not paid their dues. They let Moses know about it and wanted him to shut them up.

Even though this all took place thousands of years ago, it is a scene repeated today as families squabble and bicker. Children complain about their parents. Parents complain about their kids. Strife and conflict disrupt once tranquil families. Everyone is convinced that life is not fair. They are getting a raw deal. They deserve better than this.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *“These are your kids, not mine!”*

Disgusted with the behavior of the Israelites, Moses turns in anger toward God. God called him to do this job. He never wanted it. Now the very people, who ought to be thankful for all that he has done for them, turn on him. Why is God doing this to him? He cannot do this by himself. This job is crushing him. If he was in charge, which he probably thinks he should be, he would never tolerate such behavior.

With imagery that our world might find shocking, Moses compares God to a mother who gave birth to this child, Israel. Moses is not their mother. God is. God conceived them, gave birth to them, nursed them at her breast and has carried them in her arms into the wilderness. God had given Israel to Moses to mother. However, now Moses is convinced that the job is too big for him. Moses would never mother like this. If he were God (which he would probably like to be), he would not tolerate such insolence

and let his kids get away with behavior like this.

Moses' complaint reveals the distrust and resentment that have crept into his heart. Such distrust and resentment also creep into our hearts when we believe that life/God has not been fair to us and has not given to us what we think we deserve.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *"I quit! This is killing me!"*

When this "leadership thing" did not turn out to be what Moses expected or wanted, he wants to quit. He cannot do it alone. Of course, it never was his to do alone. However, Moses thought it should be. When he cannot have things on his terms, he is done. It is killing him—which life does to all of us when we think that we can be God and live our lives as if we are the ones in charge. Moses cannot go on if he cannot have things "my way." Moses wants proof that he has "found favor" in God's sight. When we demand that God prove himself to us like this, we have only proven that we too are no better than the whining complainers we despise. God concurs.

PROGNOSIS: When the Family Flourishes

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *When Mother Never Gives Up*

Despite Moses' despair, at least he has the good sense to give Israel back to their mother. After all, God, like a good mother, did conceive them. God did birth them. God did nurse them and teach them to walk in the wilderness. Even though they had become childish, insolent and stubborn, even though Moses' patience had run out, Moses leaves Israel on their mother's doorstep. His patience may run out, but he dares to believe that God's patience had not.

He was right. God was not going to give up on Moses or on Israel. Moses did not need to go it alone. God graciously

provides 70 elders so that not only would Moses have help but also that the illusion that Moses had to lead Israel by himself would die.

Such divine grace foreshadows the same kind of motherly compassion and sacrifice that God expressed in Christ. As a mother sacrifices herself for his children, regardless of their whining and complaining, so God in Christ sacrifices for us. What was killing Moses and what kills all of us, (our desire to be God in the face of God's own rejection of such faithless arrogance), God chooses to bear for us at the cross. God "pays" for silly petulance. God suffers what we deserve. This mother is willing to eat her own anger and disappointment and "die" for her children.

Such love is not in vain. Such love does not go to waste. God raises Jesus from the dead and offers her children a new life and a second chance. God will not abandon us and leave us orphaned in the wilderness. God comes, again and again, in Word and Sacrament, as our mother longing to take us back into her loving arms, even as we continue to whine and complain.

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Back In Mother's Arms, Never Giving Up*

Moses realizes that he does not need to lead Israel by himself. He is now willing to "die" and let go of this foolish and deadly desire to go it alone. Trusting the promise of the God who keeps her promises, renewed, strengthened and back in his mother's arms, he is not going to quit and give up on Israel. Instead, he reminds Israel of the "words of the Lord." No longer wanting to give up, he is able to "let go" of his self-pity and take hold of the God who has given him this people to love.

In the same way, trusting that we are in the arms of Christ, we get to die and be raised from the deadly life of going it alone.

Relieved to be back in the arms of our mother, we get to let her take care of our sin. We will not quit on God or ourselves. We will not abandon those whom God has given us to love.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *All in the Family*
Refreshed by God's intervention, overflowing with an abundant spirit, Moses is willing to welcome more into the "family" and share the spirit of leadership. When others want to control and limit God's generosity by excluding Eldad and Medad, Moses resists their opposition and welcomes these outsiders with open arms. Like the mother who welcomed him back into her arms, Moses is willing to welcome all into the family who prophesy and proclaim the wondrous love of God. Moses does not need to go it alone. God's generosity knows no limits. "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit upon them."

That is what God does through us. Safely in our mother's arms, we are free to be generous and welcoming. In this new family of believers, there is no need to guard jealously the love of God. We can give it away . . . to the seventy . . . and even to unauthorized, unrecognized and unofficial folks like Eldad and Medad.