

“The Birth Pangs of Community”
September 29, 2024
Scripture: Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Mark 9:38-50

Creating a community isn't easy. I know because I've watched *Survivor* and I've seen how hard it can be to get along with people who are different from you. Put into that forced situation, many of the contestants start to say and do things they never would have considered under ordinary circumstances. It's hard to bond with other people when there are limited resources and everyone's feeling tired and hungry. Not to mention the threat of being voted off the island hanging over your head. So, it's not entirely realistic, I'll grant you. But there are dynamics at work even in that contrived setting that are common to every collection of people living under stress.

And that's what we find with the Israelites during their wandering in the desert. They're under tremendous stress; they can barely tolerate the conditions of little food and water and people around them who can be hostile and, at times I'm sure, insufferable. And when we meet them in this part of their story, they have had it. They're fed up. They're sick of manna, those lovely delicate flakes of what apparently is insect excreta...? No one knows for sure, the word “manna” literally means “what is that.” Whatever it is, they're ready for some variety. And they're feeling a little homesick.

It's a not a good look. It's making Moses mad, and worse yet, making God mad. Which doesn't seem to intimidate Moses at all. He lets God have it. “Just kill me now!” Moses yells at God, “I cannot take this anymore.” Anyone who thought the escape from Egypt and the journey to the Promised Land would be a piece of cake, something they also would have preferred to manna, really doesn't know much about what it takes to create a community. What's happening in the desert is a very rough birth. And it's not because the people don't want what God has promised. I think it's because generations of enslavement aren't just wiped away overnight.

We bring into our relationships all the biases and assumptions we learned in our histories, so as things get harder and harder to endure, all the Israelites can remember about Egypt was they didn't have to buy their own food. They were enslaved and nearly worked to death, not to mention the attempt to control their population through infanticide, but at least they had three meals a day. A romanticized memory of the past is also a challenge for new and changing communities.

The solution God offers Moses is kind of brilliant. Assigning other people to share the burden of leadership happens in a little different way in Exodus, you may remember. There it was Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, who suggests he find seventy elders and empower them to share the burden. Here that development is attributed to God, which gives it instant legitimacy. This doesn't solve the food issue, but it does deal with a much deeper problem. By centering the responsibility for the community's success or failure in one person, any voice of complaint can gain a hearing. But when you diffuse that responsibility, so there are dozens of people who have a direct stake in the future and are responsible for the outcome, those lone voices have less

power. Shared leadership is stronger than unitary leadership. It requires compromise and forces people to listen to each other and hear different perspectives.

The Israelites had no other model of governance than the tyranny of Egypt. It was a dictatorship that was entirely controlled by the Pharaoh. They were called to be a new kind of community, but getting there wouldn't be easy. There are birth pangs along the way as God becomes the midwife helping Israel to be born.

Every new community experiences birth pangs. In Mark's gospel we can hear an echo of those challenges. One of the disciples is alarmed that someone from the outside is doing things in Jesus' name, someone unauthorized is acting on their behalf. Had that person been doing something harmful in Jesus' name I suspect his response would be different, but in this case the stranger is casting out demons, providing healing. And Jesus has no problem with it. Even though this person isn't among his followers physically, they are still part of his new community spiritually: "Whoever is not against us is for us."

Then Jesus says this odd thing that I almost feel requires a disclaimer. When he tells his disciples what to do when their hand, foot or eye offend them, he isn't speaking literally. That seems obvious, but there are folks in the world who have harmed themselves on the weight of those words. What Jesus is saying, I think, is when we are in community and have mutual responsibility for one another's well-being, we have to be intentional with our actions and words. By placing these words in the context of causing "little ones," children possibly or new believers maybe, to stumble the writer of the gospel ties Jesus' injunctions to behavior that influences others and not just personal, private morality. The new community struggling to be born through Jesus' teachings is one where we all have responsibility for each other. Our success or failure isn't dependent on any single person, but lies with all of us.

Recently we've been hearing about a community going through birth pangs in Springfield, Ohio. With the arrival over the last few years of thousands of Haitian refugees who were encouraged to come for jobs that needed workers, there's been a lot of stress on the community. That would be expected. The school system, the medical system, the traffic system would all be affected. But we're hearing about it recently because of false claims about the Haitian population which has led to the wider population taking action. The white residents are making a point to eat in Haitian-owned restaurants and frequent Haitian-owned businesses in a show of solidarity and support. They're taking responsibility for the well-being of their neighbors and helping a new community be born. That doesn't solve their problems, there's a lot to manage, but it shows a commitment by the original residents to tie their future to the new arrivals so everyone can benefit. And, so the world can see what's possible when a community welcomes immigrants and allows itself to be transformed into something new.

The birth pangs of community are unavoidable, whether it's a nation, a city, or a church. There will always be problems in need of solving, nostalgia for how things used to be, and expectations of leaders to do something to fix things. What we learn from the Israelite story is God isn't indifferent to those needs and can act on our behalf by looking to the wider community for leadership and pulling more folks into the center of responsibility so no one is left to shoulder the burden alone but everyone has a stake the outcome. Jesus warns his disciples of how

important it is to be intentional when caring for others in the community. What we say and what we do, all of it matters. And when we get it wrong, when we cause someone to stumble, it can be devastating.

We are all responsible for the life of this community. We all have a stake in one another's well-being. Just as God heard Moses in his despair and frustration, God hears us and guides us toward deeper relationships and more intentional actions. This community is in the process of being born every day, and it's up to each of us to stand alongside one another for support and care, and to let the world know God is near and we have nothing to fear.

Amen