

September 26, 2021
Lectionary 26, Year B
The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29
Mark 9:38-50
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Partners

At 2:00 this afternoon, I have the honor of preaching and serving as the installing minister at the installation of the newish pastor at St. John Lutheran Church, in Sudbury. The new pastor is named Eric Wolf and he is someone who actually presided at some of our outdoor communion services while I was on vacation during the summer of 2020.

I say that he is the newish pastor at St. John, because he has actually been serving there since Christmas.

It's not unusual for it to take a while before an installation happens. My own installation was held in May, five months after my arrival here at Emmanuel.

Planning Pastor Eric's installation has been made even more challenging by the pandemic. The people of St. John, have been waiting and hoping as we have, for their worship life to get back to something that resembles normal before they undertook Pastor Eric's installation.

Early this summer, just as they were preparing to move back into their building, a date was set, this date, September 26th, with them thinking that by now, they would be at full capacity in their sanctuary. They, like we, were not expecting another surge, not expecting the Delta variant or breakthrough infections, or still unvaccinated children.

So, the installation will still be happening today, but it will be happening outside, under tents that were ordered for sun protection, but which might be needed for rain.

I think that Pastor Eric made a bold choice for his installation service.

It is a very unusual thing for a Lutheran pastor to actually get to choose the readings for a worship service. There are assigned readings for every Sunday in the church year, and for every festival in the church year, and even for almost every occasion in the life of the church, like the anniversary of a congregation, the dedication of a church building, or a day of national mourning or celebration.

One of the few times that pastors actually get to choose the readings for a particular event in the church is the occasion of their installation. Because an installation usually takes place at a time other than the regular worship service of the day, the installation is not bound by the lectionary texts.

So, the pastor who is being installed, can choose to have some of his or her favorite scripture readings read as his or her ministry at a congregation is formalized and celebrated with prayer, worship, and words of commitment voiced by the pastor and by the congregation.

Of course, since I'm preaching at the service later today, Pastor Eric and I talked quite a bit about what scripture readings he wanted to have read at his installation and that's when he made, what I thought was a bold choice. He decided that he wanted the assigned readings for today to be the readings that would be shared at his installation.

So, later today, in the presence of Pastor Eric and his congregation, and all who gather for that worship service, as they formally celebrate and acknowledge their ministry together and bind themselves together as pastor and people with vows and promises, they will hear these words read from today's gospel reading from Mark:

If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea. (Mark 9:42)

And the pressure's on. Because anyone who has ever preached, knows that sometimes something you say from the pulpit hits someone in just the wrong way, either they misunderstand or misconstrue what you say or what they hear—because sometimes what they heard isn't even what they the preacher said—and they grow offended or hurt or angry and decide perhaps that they need a break from church, a break from worship.

Sometimes they'll tell the preacher why and there's an opportunity for clarification, explanation, and often, though not always, reconciliation, but sometimes they'll just vanish,

Or sometimes they hear exactly what is said and understand it exactly as it was intended to be heard and it brushes up against some kind of deeply held belief, some conviction that they

hold, or some behavior that they are engaging in that is contrary to the gospel, and when they hear it confronted in a sermon, or in a pastoral interaction, then that can sting and it can be easier to close one's ears than to have one's beliefs and actions challenged.

If an installation is about a pastor being solely responsible for the faith of all of the individuals who are part of a congregation, then it would be hard to imagine why anyone would put themselves into that kind of situation, into that kind of position.

But, of course, that is not what it means to be a pastor and that's not what it means to be a congregation and pastor together at all.

Because what our gospel reading for today also says is this:

John said to [Jesus,] "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us. (Mark 9:38-40)

It says that ministry in Jesus' name is a group project. It is about a community in ministry together, working together, listening together, discerning the will and call of God together, and then doing it, not just together, but in partnership with others, beyond their walls, beyond their membership list, even, sometimes, where values are shared and where through action together, life and hope and healing can be given, even beyond theological conviction.

Sometimes, we can find partners in ministry, in good works, in loving and serving our community, even in people who do not share our faith, but who do share with us a commitment to care for our neighbors.

The ministry that we have been called to together involves everyone sharing his or her gifts, everyone living the gospel in a way that looks beyond ourselves, not just to find people in need, but to find others who are doing the kind of life giving or life restoring ministry that Jesus has called us to, and work with them.

Ministry is not the task of one person, the pastor, but it is also not just the calling of one community of pastor and people.

A commentary that I read on today's gospel reading from Mark 9 said this about this incident, about the disciples trying to stop someone from working in Jesus' name. "The spirit of Mark 9:38-41 stresses gracious reception of anyone whose action, bold or modest, genuinely conforms to Jesus' character" (Working Preacher 9/26/21 C. Clifton Black).

Ministry is bigger than one person. It is bigger than one church. It is about God's Spirit working in the world in ways that we don't get to manage or control or even completely understand.

Take a look at our reading from the Old Testament today, from the book of Numbers.

It starts with Moses being at the end of his rope. He just can't handle being the leader of the Hebrew people alone anymore. They are discontent, needy, critical, of him and of the Lord. So, Moses comes before the Lord. He prays,

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 (Numbers 11:11b-15).

The Lord hears Moses' prayer and does not answer it in the way that Moses says that he wants it to be answered. In his prayer, Moses says that he wants to be put to death, but that is not what God does. Moses is not put to death. Instead, he is given what he really needs, which is partners to share his burden.

The Lord has Moses gather 70 of the elders and leaders of the people. It doesn't say it in our reading for today, since today's reading is somewhat chopped up, going from verse 16 to verse 24, but this is what the Lord says to Moses in verse 17:

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 (Numbers 11:17).

The tasks that Moses had thought were his to bear alone became the work of the community. He was given partners, others to help in the bearing of the burdens of leadership and service.

And of course, there were some who wanted to put limits and boundaries on this outpouring of the Lord's spirit, when two men, who were not with the gathering of the seventy, Eldad and Medad, received the Spirit and began prophesying in the camp.

The expectation of Joshua, one of Moses' trusted assistants was that Moses would want them to be stopped.

But Moses responded, "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!" (Numbers 11:29).

Moses' hope and prayer was that all of the Lord's people would receive God's Spirit, and because of that would come to know God, to trust God, to have an intimate relationship with God, so that they could put aside their fears, their misunderstandings, and all of the things that caused them not to trust in their God who had brought them out of slavery in Egypt.

Today, we can celebrate that what Moses hoped for is our experience; the Holy Spirit of God, resting not just on one person or on a few people, but on all of us, blessing us all with wisdom, with insight, with perception, and with drive for service.

The privilege of our ministry together, and the ministry of Pastor Eric and the community at St. John, and our ministry together with other Christians and people of good will in Norwood, and in the New England Synod, and beyond, is to celebrate that Spirit working in us and to listen and respond as the Spirit equips and inspires for ministry to the world where God has heard the cries of the people in the wilderness and sends us, partners, to care, to love, to serve in Jesus' name. Amen.