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“Tattletales”

A sermon by Sam R. Miglarese

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

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Numbers 11:25–29; James 5:1–6; Mark 9:38–41

We have all used the language of “insider/outsider”—the big tent of who’s in it or who’s not, whether the tent is big enough or small enough. We do this especially when we discuss insider information and the inner circle of relationships. Today, Moses and Jesus address the inclusivity of God’s gifts and the spirit in spite of the overwhelming tendency towards exclusivity.

When I first heard these parallel readings with Moses and Jesus dealing with the reporting of others who acted **without** proper credentials to do what they were doing, I immediately thought of tattletaling. I can imagine, as parents and teachers or as religious educators, you dealt with that sort of phenomenon that usually occurs with children, who without doing any necessary harm to others, have a tendency to sometimes put others at fault for breaking the rules at home, or in the classroom or on the playground. There is a tendency in human nature to hold ourselves up as being better when we put the blame on another for actions that break the rules. For many, it is a ploy to get attention.

I think that’s what happened in these two readings. Go back and look at the story of Medad and Eldad in the Book of Numbers: The Lord went out and told the people the words of the Lord, and they gathered seventy elders of the people and placed them all around the tent. The Lord came down, spoke to them, and took some of his spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders. When the spirit rested on them, they prophesied. There were two men who weren’t in the tent but were in the

camp. Guess what: they received the same spirit as the seventy in the tent. But once they began to prophesy in the camp, someone saw them and ran immediately to Moses and said, “Stop them! They are prophesying in the camp!” Joshua, who is Moses’ chief of staff, his main assistant, said, “Yes, yes, stop them, my lord, Moses.” Then Moses said to him, “Are you jealous for my sake?” And then he adds this wonderful turn of phrase: “Would that all the Lord’s people are prophets, and that the Lord would put the spirit on them!” (cf. Numbers 11:25–29) Moses rejoices over the lavish abandonment with which God bestows his gifts and his spirit on his people.

In the selection from Mark which parallels the one we just heard from Numbers, we have another story of a tattletale. This time, it’s John. “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him!” Jesus said, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able, afterwards, to speak ill of me.” They were appalled at the sight of someone doing what they were doing who was not a follower of Jesus, and they wanted him stopped even though the results of the one who was casting out demons, this strange exorcist, was accomplishing and performing the same success as they were in deliverance of evil spirits. It’s the substance of the act that really counts.

In both circumstances, the tattlers were looking for a reward, for recognition for the ways in which they were more concerned about credentials, protocols, procedures, and the mission than they were about the substance of what was happening in the midst of them as they were performing under the power of the spirit and the deliverance of evil spirits.

All of us can identify with the way in which these individuals, who were looking for exclusive access to God’s power, were reminded by Moses and Jesus that God’s spirit is bestowed upon all.

I would like to reflect with you on three examples about the big tent, about modern tattletalers, and about the challenge that all of us have received by realizing and reaffirming that we are all recipients of God’s spirit. If I was asked once this morning, I was asked fifteen times about my impressions of the papal visit. I don’t know why me above all others, but nonetheless, let me address what I feel was an

interesting feature of that visit.

Clearly, when Francis addressed Congress this past week, I found it fascinating that he acknowledged four great Americans who were part of our American history:

- **Abraham Lincoln**, who managed to pull together a nation torn apart by civil war, with his appeal to the “better angels of our nature.” We all probably heard the pope and shook our heads, yes, Lincoln deserves that.
- Then he mentioned **Martin Luther King, Jr.**, a Baptist preacher, who had a dream that we be judged not by the color of our skin but by the content of our character. We acknowledge that as an appropriate member of this great lexicon of American history.
- He then came up with two names that surprised me and maybe surprised you. He mentioned **Dorothy Day**. I’m not sure if many of you know much about Dorothy Day, who was the founder of the Catholic Worker movement, but her story was very messy. Yet, she ends up being this powerful social activist. I’m sure that because he mentioned it in this address, she will receive a lot more attention than she’s ever received in a long time.
- He ends by mentioning **Thomas Merton**. Here is a social activist monk who led a messy, some even call it a bohemian life, ends up in the monastery, working hand in glove with the peace movement and the nonviolent civil rights movement all through the course of his life. He is probably one of the most important Catholic authors of the twentieth century.

I found the way in which Pope spoke and addressed, as he called it, the four Americans who shaped fundamental values which will endure forever in the spirit of the American people. I was surprised that the tent was large enough in his description of this legacy to include Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton. He ended up by saying in that section of the talk, “In honoring their memory, we are inspired, even amid conflicts, and in the here and now of each day, to draw upon our deepest cultural reserves.” The tent, indeed, is big, and I think those examples of American icons helps us appreciate that truth.

Secondly, modern tattletalers: the recent main concern of the presidential debates,

especially in the Republican Party—I noticed the Democrats have been silent about this all these days—is that of immigration which has been at the forefront of policy decision making. Here is my point: I read recently that in one of the northern counties of Virginia, they passed a law to empower the police to stop anyone who looked Hispanic in order to allow them to demand of them their papers to see whether they were legal or not. This is tattletaling at the worst because these folks then could be deported for not being in compliance with the law of the land. This is one instance of tattletaling that has harmful effects.

The most important message I want to leave with you today, besides the fact that our church is a big tent, and our nation is as well, is that we are called upon to resolve problems in our nation without turning on one another because of our differences so that we can build up the common good. The message I want to leave with you this morning is that you have been given, in your baptisms, your own spirit of prophecy. You all have been gifted with the gifts of God.

- 1) That has shown itself in the way in which the older members of our community have been able to convey to us—in conversation, Faith and Community class, Journeys class—their own wisdom of living throughout the many stages of life.
- 2) I've seen it in the way in which people who have experienced the deaths of their husbands, their wives, those who are experiencing disease or suffering or brokenness in any way have been able, in some real way, to capture the truth that is of God through those experiences. And we have become the beneficiaries of that gift.
- 3) Finally, I want to mention that all of us who have been given this gift of the spirit, the gifts of God, have a responsibility to reach out to those who are in real need—the homeless, the unemployed, the hungry—and our church has always been committed in many, varied ways to doing just that.

In conclusion, there is also this sense of being cognizant and being aware of our own giftedness, and if we are aware of it, **big things can happen.**

The section from Annie Dillard's work that many of you have heard before that helps us realize that despite all the challenges we all have in getting to church on

time and paying attention, she says:

“On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does not one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return” (*Teaching a Stone to Talk*, Harper & Row, 1982).

What a powerful message about what can happen here to us who receive that portion of the spirit that gives us the chance to prophesy with power. We are a uniquely gifted people with the potential to change the world.