

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

On Friday, soon after Kathryn emailed the weekly announcements and a link to the October newsletter, one of our parishioners responded with a short but critical email to me, reminding me for the umpteenth time that this person dislikes me and does not support my ministry here. Whether written or spoken, words like that are hurtful and it's hard not to be affected by them. Even so, that very deliberate effort to hurt me connects directly with the common theme of today's passages from Numbers and the Gospel of Mark. It's the age-old question of leadership: who's going to do what, and by whose authority. One commentator wrote that the Numbers passage echoes the Gospel passage, and of course that's why the two are presented together on this Sunday.

Together these passages demonstrate that there has always been an issue about leadership in communities of faith. The question of power and authority are an issue today not only at St. Francis, but in many other churches, in this diocese and across our country, in our denomination and in every other denomination. Challenges between priests and their congregations may arise for a variety of reasons, but the expectations of ministry, the interpretation of what ministry means and how it will look in that particular place often seem to be at the root of these challenges. These differences of opinion can create frustration and discontent on both sides, and if unresolved lead to conflict and division. The whole thing can be downright ugly, far different from God's desire for us as people of faith.

Look at what's happening with Moses in our passage from Numbers today. Throughout their long journey in the desert, the Israelites have proven themselves to be more motivated by their desire for comfort and familiarity, even in a bad situation, than by God's promise of a new home for them in the land of milk and honey. Moses, who was called by God to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land, bears the brunt of their discontent. They criticize him often, not only for his human mistakes and shortcomings, but also for things that are truly out of his control.

God is the mastermind of the Israelites' journey; Moses is simply the guide, called not to serve the people, but to serve God by leading the people. And although he is not perfect, throughout the journey we see him struggling to follow God's direction while trying to maintain some semblance of peace and order among those he leads. We also see that the constant criticism wears on Moses, and in today's passage he's had enough. He lashes out at God, finally saying "I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me. God responds by calling into leadership seventy elders of the people. When the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again. Only two of them prophesied in the camp, and those two were criticized for it. It is much easier to criticize and complain, it seems, than to take part and responsibility in resolving a problem or to answer a call to serve God.

The situation in the Gospel lesson is similar, yet different. "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us." *The Message* translation says "we tried to stop him because he wasn't part of our group," making the point more clear. The disciples had created an understanding of ministry with specific boundaries and qualifications. The person they saw casting out demons in Jesus' name wasn't doing so within the structure they had anticipated or expected. Jesus reminds them that the reward is not in "how" something is done, but in "why."

Then, cautioning them against putting stumbling blocks before others, Jesus tells them that they should remove whatever causes them to stumble. Cut it off; tear it out. It's better to enter the kingdom of God damaged and dismembered than to be thrown into hell. "For everyone will be

salted with fire. Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.” As *The Message* puts it, “Be preservatives yourselves. Preserve the peace.” Serving God is not about personalities and personal preferences, or being for or against the rector or anyone else for that matter. It’s about being on God’s side, because in the end, God is the one who matters, the only one who matters. Serving God means building up that which is good—including our brothers and sisters in Christ—while tearing out that which causes us or anyone else to stumble.

In the midst of criticism and negativity, it’s often hard to remember all that is good. Today, as we commission our first class of Stephen Ministers, we’ll be reminded that there are many caring and loving people serving God in our faith community. These four women have come to the Parish House almost every Wednesday night since April 15 to be trained for this very special caregiving ministry. Soon they’ll be paired with four other women, to journey with them through difficult personal situations. It’s been an honor and privilege for Judi Gustafson and me to serve as their trainers, and to get know these women well over the past five and a half months. During that time there have been no issues of personality or personal preference. It’s obvious that each of them has been called to this ministry, and there’s no doubt they are on God’s side, working to build up the Body of Christ in our parish through their ministry. That’s what happens when we put our own wants and needs and preferences aside for the sake of the Gospel and in response to God’s call.

There are many wonderful ministries going on in and through St. Francis these days. Week in and week out, there are people here who give their time and talent in ministries like Welcome Table; reading stories to our day school children and mentoring students in our public schools; in Sunday morning ministries as teachers, lectors, chalice bearers, acolytes, ushers, choir members; visiting the homebound and taking communion to them; providing transportation for folks who can’t drive. The opportunities for ministry are infinite, limited only by our imaginations. I give deep thanks for those who are focused on God’s purpose for our parish, which is of course, to serve God by serving others. Whenever I encounter negativity, as I did on Friday, and when I hear gossip or unkind remarks about any of God’s beloved children here, I imagine what would happen if that negative energy was used for something positive, something loving and life-giving. God has called us to be here together in this place at this time, and through our interactions with each other, God provides lessons to be learned—even from those we don’t particularly like or with whom we disagree. Often they are our best teachers.

Jesus says, according to Mark, that “whoever is not against us is for us.” Matthew puts it another way in his gospel, saying “Whoever is not with me is against me.” Most of us, I think, favor Matthew’s version. It’s more comfortable for us to have clearly identified guidelines and boundaries within which to operate. It’s safer, more predictable, more comfortable when we can divide people into two camps, those who are with us and those who are against us, friends and enemies. Surely that is not what God intends for us. Being in ministry together despite our uncertainties and our discomfort builds our trust for one another, and more importantly, our trust for God’s presence and guidance in all that we do in God’s name. And that can only be positive for our church. Together we can shift our way of thinking to believe that whoever is not against us is for us. It seems counter-cultural, even counter-intuitive to our desire for safety and comfort, but it will make us preservatives of the peace for which God sent Christ into the world.

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable to the Lord, our God. *Amen.*