

## Unexpected Providing

Sermon: Year B, Pentecost 19, Proper 21, Lectionary 26

Texts: Numbers 11:4–6, 10–16, 24–29, Mark 9:38–50

Preached: September 30, 2016 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart, be acceptable in your sight, O God, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN

Have you ever known people who weren't ever happy with what they have? I once had a friend who was like that. A group of us would go out to try different restaurants. This one friend would agonize as he perused the menu, never able to narrow it down. He would finally make a decision when forced to. When the dishes were served, though, no matter how delectable the choice that he had made, he would begin to look at what others had ordered and begin complaining that he should have gotten what we had. That was usually followed by a request to taste our various dishes, and after taking samples all around, he would usually declare that what he had ordered was all but inedible, and that what we others had was much better. What he had in front of him, no matter how good it might actually be, was never as good as what he longed for. He could never appreciate what was in front of him.

I was put in mind of that as I read the passage from Numbers, where the Israelites are complaining about the food God has been providing for them in the desert. They complain about the manna that God has provided for them every day, and beg to have God give them meat instead. They salivate as they remember the fish they used to get back in slavery days in Egypt, their mouths water as they describe the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, the garlic... They complain loudly, weeping and moaning. Why, oh why, had they followed Moses out into the desert? All they have to eat is this lousy manna. Sure, it meets all their needs for food, but it is so boring! And it's so much work to gather it, and boil it, and grind it into flour, and make cakes from it, and fry it up in oil. And it is the same old thing, day after day after day. Moses, we want some meat!

And the people aren't the only ones complaining. The complaints roll uphill. Moses begins to complain to God about the people God has given him to care for. "God, why did you stick me with these whiners? They're crybabies, and I'm tired of having to carry them around like I'm some nursemaid. Six hundred thousand people, and not one of them will help me! All they do is complain! If this is the way you're going to treat me, then just kill me now! Put me out of my misery!" Moses feels as though he's the only one pulling his weight, that nobody is helping him, that he's in this all alone, and it is all God's fault.

That is our own nature we see there, isn't it? Our tendency is to not be content with what we have, to always think that someone else is getting something better, to look back to the past and think that what we used to have was so much better than what we have now—even if what we have now is perfectly adequate for our needs. We always want something more, some envisioned perfection. We're not happy to be in the present moment, either looking back to an imagined golden past, or looking forward to a longed-for better future. And all too often, we fail to see what we have in front of us, fail to see how God has provided for us.

And like Moses, those of us in leadership complain regularly that we're in this all alone, that nobody is willing to help, that all other people do is complain, that nothing we do seems to be adequate, that people are wanting to be carried like babies, that no one in history has ever been treated so badly. We rant at God, cross our arms, and say, "This is your problem, God. Count me out. I'm done. Kill me now. I'm not going to do this anymore. You solve the problem." It becomes all about us. We do not see anyone helping, don't see how we're going to accomplish what needs to be done.

So with all this complaining, God gets a bit annoyed. After all, God has provided perfectly adequate food every single day. But it's not the food they want. So, in the next part of the story that we didn't hear today, God provides a solution. He tells Moses to tell the people that God will send what they want. God will send them their meat. In fact, God says he's going to give them meat not just for one day, or two days, or five days, or ten days, or twenty days, but for a whole month—"until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you." Then God causes a big wind to blow up, and on it God sends a vast flock of quail to land in and around the camp of the Israelites, three feet deep, spread out a day's journey in every direction, more than they can possibly consume. Be careful what you wish for! You want meat? I'll give you meat! A side note: Sometimes what we long for is not what is best for us!

And as for Moses, God tells him to assemble seventy of the elders of the people and to position them around the tent of the tabernacle, where God was considered to dwell. It's a not-so-subtle reminder that there is already leadership present among the people that Moses simply isn't putting to good use. He's trying to go it alone, not using the gifts and talents of the people who are there ready to help. And once assembled, God pours out the Spirit on them, the same Spirit given to Moses, and all of them begin to give messages from God, just the way Moses has been doing. In fact, that power and authority is given even to two of them who hadn't made it over to the tabernacle. The help had been there all along, but Moses hadn't been recognizing it. And the help shows up even in unexpected places, outside of the "approved" religious site.

And that is the way for us, too, isn't it? We simply don't see the ways that God provides for us, we don't see the resources that surround us, because we are too busy complaining that what we have isn't adequate for our needs—when what we really mean is that what we have doesn't fit our desires. We complain that nobody will help us, but we're not seeing that there is help all around. Part of the problem is that we have certain places that we expect to find our help, and we don't take into account that God may be providing people in unexpected places, in unexpected ways.

God can use anyone and anything for God's purposes and to respond to our needs. When we look around us and say that there's not enough, or that what we have isn't good enough, or that there aren't enough bodies to help, it may well be that we're simply not recognizing the resources that God has already blown our direction.

For me as a leader in this congregation, it has been exciting to see the folks that God has blown our way, impelled by that Spirit Breath of God. To me, it's amazing that many of the volunteers making these quilts that you see all around you, thick as a cloud of quail, are not members or attenders here at Immanuel, yet they come week after week to produce these quilts that will serve the needs of refugees and those with no belongings to their name around the world. It's a sign of God's providing that on God's Work, Our Hands day God blew a flock of willing people to assemble even more quilts, helping create a superabundance of 160 quilts, more than we have ever blessed in one year. The same is true each month as I walk into the kitchen on Café Immanuel Sunday to see that many of the hands making and serving breakfast to our neighbors are not members of Immanuel—and include a Buddhist family, a Jewish man, a Muslim woman, and people with no particular religious affiliation. God does not believe in limiting the work to "the usual suspects." God provides in unexpected ways.

If we're looking for God's providing, we have to look beyond the categories of insider/outsider. God's Spirit is poured out and empowers all kinds of people we probably aren't even considering as helpers in this work God has given us. God is providing in ways we simply don't expect. So, next time you're complaining that there aren't enough people to do the work we've been given, that we're too small a congregation to dream big, stop for a moment, look around, feel the wind of the Spirit blowing, and look to see who God has blown our direction to help who we haven't even been thinking to ask to work alongside us.

We are on a trek, just like the Children of Israel. The trek can be daunting, wearying, discouraging at times. We look back to "glory days" and long to go back to a past that we imagine to be better. But God calls us to be present in the moment, and calls us to trust that God will provide, and is already providing, in ways that meet the need. God will pour out the Spirit on unexpected people to provide the leadership and the willing workers. Feel that breeze blowing? That's God's Spirit, blowing in what we need. Thanks be to God. AMEN