

PENTECOST 18

September 27, 2015

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29

(Mark 9:38-50)

"Howdy Duty"

Pastor Saul Stensvaag

Okay, let me re-cap for you: Moses, exhausted from being the only "official" leader of God's people, asks God for help, and God responds by having Moses gather 70 elders at the tent of meeting. There God pours out His spirit upon them, and they prophesy.

This is all fine and good, but then someone discovers that two other men, Eldad and Medad, who were not at the tent, have also apparently received part of God's spirit and are prophesying. Joshua, jealously trying to guard Moses' position of authority, urges Moses to stop these two men since they're outside the group.

We can almost hear him say: *"They haven't gone to seminary - they haven't been officially ordained. They're not even ELCA!"*

Like many of us, Joshua is uncomfortable when he sees evidence that **God's Holy Spirit blows where it will**, often **overflowing what we think are its proper boundaries**.

Moses' response is very interesting: *"Are you jealous for my sake?"* he asks. *"Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them."*

This response is echoed by Jesus in today's Gospel, where John wants Jesus to stop some unofficial disciples from acting in Jesus' name, but Jesus says, let them be. Whoever isn't against us is for us.

NOW, PICTURE THIS SCENE, IF YOU WOULD.

It's 8:20 on a Sunday morning at First Lutheran. The pastors and other worship leaders are **gathered in the conference room for prayer and last-minute instructions**. The acolyte hasn't shown up yet, so naturally, the Senior Pastor is nervous, when he'd rather be calmly preparing his heart for worship.

Suddenly, a member of the congregation comes into the room, all out of breath, and announces to the pastors, *"There are two members standing by the entrance greeting everyone as they arrive, and **they're not the official greeters for today. Make them stop!**"*

Friends, if this little bit of fiction ever actually happened, I can assure you that **I would respond with Moses:**

"Would that all the Lord's people were greeters, using the Holy Spirit that's been given them for Christian service."

You see, the MINISTRY OF HOSPITALITY is one we can all share in.

Hospitality should be JOB NUMBER ONE FOR ALL CHURCH MEMBERS - not just for pastors and official greeters.

What would First Lutheran Church look like if each one of us took seriously **our calling to be ministers of Christian hospitality**? First, we should ask the question, “*WHO IS THE STRANGER?*” **Now, stranger” is a good, biblical term**, and so I would like to use it, but you can mentally substitute the word *newcomer, outsider, or visitor* if you like.

Who then, is the stranger? Who is the outsider? The Bible answers this question in some **shocking ways**. The Bible says that, SOMETIMES, THE STRANGER MIGHT BE AN ANGEL! Listen to Hebrews 13:

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it”.

The Bible even goes so far as to say that in the stranger, WE MAY ENCOUNTER JESUS CHRIST!

Remember Matthew 25, where the people were **surprised to discover that the stranger was really Christ**. *“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”*

Or think of last week’s Gospel, where Jesus said *“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me...”*

The **newcomer as angel -- the visitor as the presence of Christ!**

Think about these guests for a moment. **They come to church for many reasons.**

Often significant changes are going on in their lives. Maybe they’ve just moved to Fergus for a new job, or they are struggling with some family problem.

Some of them have been **Lutheran all their lives**, and can **do the liturgy with their eyes closed**. But some **visitors have had only minimal prior experience with the Christian church**.

Some have been burned by previous experience with the church as a judgmental place filled with unfriendly hypocrites. Others may have a negative view of the church because of how TV preachers and others often portray Christianity.

They come filled with doubts and fears. They aren’t exactly sure why they’re here, or if the church is really for them, but they’ve decided to give it a try.

Some of these guests **must be VERY COURAGEOUS PEOPLE to have crossed the visible and invisible barriers to come into our building**.

They may appear at ease, but inside many are tentative, uncertain, and skeptical.

How very important it is – **how absolutely crucial – that we WELCOME THEM AS IF WE ARE WELCOMING CHRIST HIMSELF!**

But just how can we welcome the stranger? We need **practical advice**, don’t we?

First, we must see the ministry of hospitality and specifically the ministry of greeting as **everyone's job**. It's true that we continue to have designated greeters standing at the entrance ramp on a Sunday morning.

These folks are, as one of my preacher friends puts it, on Howdy Duty – you know, their duty is to say “Howdy” to everyone as they come.

But don't think that's the only way in which either newcomers or regulars can feel greeted and included.

There are **hundreds of other opportunities** for each one of us to be a greeter – to WELCOME CHRIST – **in the act of welcoming someone we don't know.**

Oh I know, the easiest route for any of us to take after worship or at other church events is to greet our friends and have fellowship with them. And I get that. It's a very normal human response.

But are we **afraid to move out of that comfortable circle of friends and reach out to the stranger?**

Remember, as the letter to the Hebrews puts it, *“by showing hospitality to strangers, some have entertained angels without knowing it.”*

Wouldn't that be an exciting way to spend a coffee hour or church potluck – VISITING WITH AN ANGEL?

Don't ever assume that someone else is going to take care of the job of Christian hospitality.

Instead, how about if each of us says *“I'll make it my responsibility to welcome others?”* Then we can be sure it gets done.

Next we wonder, **“What should I say? What should I do?”** Here's a thought: **how about greeting everyone you see at church?**

If you know them, greet them by name. If you know they are visitors, introduce yourself and welcome them.

“But what about when I'm not sure? Won't someone be offended if I welcome them, only to find out they are lifelong members here?”

There's a simple remedy for that. Just say, *“Hello. I've probably met you, but I'm afraid I've forgotten. Whenever I've done that, people are happy to re-introduce themselves or tell me, “No, actually this is our first time here.”* This approach avoids embarrassment and opens the door for conversation with either a **newcomer to the church** or a **newcomer to your life.**

If you discover that they are new to First Lutheran, ask them if they need any assistance. If they're struggling to find their place in the hymnal, give them a hand. If it's during coffee time, introduce them to others - and **not just to the pastors!**

Children are another important category who deserve our friendly welcome. Please say Good Morning when you see children. Because, remember, Jesus said in last week's Gospel, when you do so, when you welcome a child, you're welcoming Christ himself!

And remember, be patient. **don't expect "results" immediately from your acts of hospitality.** Some people are only visiting, and have a home congregation where they're quite happy.

Others might find that First Lutheran just doesn't feel right for them. You and I know this is the perfect congregation, but not everyone will see that the first time they come.

That's okay. **It isn't our job as greeters to "close the deal."**

Whatever happens as a result of our ministry of hospitality, will happen **in the spirit's own good time.**

We **can't control the activity of the Holy Spirit**, any more than Moses' pals could keep the spirit of God from overflowing the tent of meeting and spreading out to include Eldad and Medad.

We can't control what God does through our ministry of hospitality, but we can truly **make ourselves open to be vessels of Christ's hospitality.** The rest is up to God.

The Holy Spirit wants us to remember that **all of us have been called to a ministry of hospitality.**
ALL OF US ARE TO BE GREETERS FOR THE LORD.

And so, I'd like to do something kinda corny this morning.

I'm going to **officially commission you all as ministers of hospitality** in this congregation.

(please stand) [Carmon, you have permission to stay seated, because you've been acting as a minister of hospitality ever since I can remember!]

First, hear the word of God from the 15th chapter of Romans: *"Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God."*

Brothers and sisters in Christ, you have been called to the ministry of hospitality, called to be greeters in this congregation. I ask you now, will you assume this ministry in confidence that it comes from God, if so, answer: *"I will, and I ask God to help me."*

Will you strive to welcome the visitor and reach out to those you don't know, seeking to see in them the very presence of Christ? If so answer: *"I will, and I ask God to help me."*

Friends, you have heard your calling and made your promises before this assembly. I therefore commission you as **MINISTERS OF HOSPITALITY** for First Lutheran Church of Fergus Falls.

Prayer: Gracious God, as you have called workers to varied tasks in the world and in your Church, so you have called these your servants to this ministry of hospitality. Grant them joy and a spirit of bold trust, that their work might reflect your love and your hospitality, through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.