

God's Gang

October 1, 2006

(Pentecost 17 - Year B)

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

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

When I was in kindergarten, there was a boy in my class named Teddy Kirby.

Teddy was the most popular boy in my kindergarten class.

And, Teddy had handpicked a group of boys to be in his "gang."

The original and creative name that he gave to his gang was: Teddy's Gang.

Being a boy in Teddy's Gang meant that, when it came time for recess, the boys in Teddy's Gang followed Teddy around the playground, as Teddy brandished this old, petrified stick, yelling and chasing the girls around the playground.

But, my best friend, Bill Koch, and I were *not* in Teddy's Gang.

Yet, we were just as capable of brandishing sticks, running around the playground and scaring the girls.

Yet, when we did brandish our own old petrified sticks and scared the girls on the playground,

A boy in Teddy's Gang would admonish us, saying:

"You can't do that.

You're not in Teddy's Gang."

Bill and I were not chosen to be in Teddy's Gang.

Bill and I were not in the "inner circle" in the intricate world of the kindergarten social system.

And, Eldad and Medad were not chosen to be in the elite group of 70 Israelite elders.

Eldad and Medad were not in the "inner circle" in the intricate world of the Hebrew social system.

The Old Testament reading today from the Book of Numbers is one of

my favorites in the whole library that we call the Bible.
It is filled with sarcasm and humor.

To recap this Old Testament story:

The Hebrew people are wandering around in the desert, after they had escaped from slavery in Egypt and walked through the Red Sea. God has been good to them, and God has rained down manna, every day, for them to eat.

But, the Hebrew people begin to complain, thinking that the grass was greener when they were slaves in Egypt.

The Hebrew people whine:

“If only we had meat to eat!

We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing,
The cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, the garlic;
But now our strength is dried up,
And there is nothing at all but this manna to look at!”

Moses, the leader of the Hebrew people, throws his hands up in the air, railing at God and saying:

“Where am I going to get meat to give to all these people?

For they come weeping to me and say:

‘Give us meat to eat!’

[God], I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me.

If this is the way you are going to treat me, [then just] put me to death at once.”

Yes, Moses is a little melodramatic with God.

But, God hears the temper tantrum of Moses and tells Moses to gather together 70 elders.

These 70 elders will become Moses’ inner circle, to share the burden of leadership.

So, Moses and his gang of 70 go into a tent and do all the stuff that Old Testament folks do, like praying and prophesying.

But, outside the tent, outside the inner circle, 2 men named Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.

So then, Joshua, one of Moses' assistants, frantically comes up to Moses to tell him:

“Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.

My lord Moses, stop them!”

Moses, however, knows that Joshua is just jealous.

Joshua is jealous because Eldad and Medad are brandishing their own sticks, scaring the girls on the playground and prophesying, outside of the inner circle.

Eldad and Medad are not in the tent with Moses' Gang.

However, Eldad and Medad are just as qualified and worthy to prophesy as anybody who is in the inner circle.

When we exclude people from our inner circle,

It really says more about us, than what it says about the people being excluded.

When we exclude people from our inner circle,

It is usually because of our own insecurity and jealousy.

For, the story of Eldad and Medad tells me that when we are in the inner circle, when we are in the gang, we must lay aside our insecurity and jealousy, to open and enlarge our circle.

And, the first thoughts that cross my mind are the sins of racism and sexism that have perpetuated and entrenched these inner circles.

For as much as I want to think that we, as a society, have learned our lessons, I am reminded of how far we have to come.

Just this last week, Susan traveled to her hometown in Kentucky.

And she learned that the church that she grew up in has just hired a new assistant pastor.

And, the new pastor happens to be African-American.

And, one of the elders of the church has now resigned, because the new pastor is black.

Just this last week, some of the leaders in our sister Anglican churches around the world issued a statement,

A statement saying that they will not sit at the same table with our new Presiding Bishop of the American Episcopal Church, Katharine Jefferts-Schori.

One of the reasons for this is because Bishop Jefferts-Schori is a woman.

Those in the inner circles, those in the gang, are still running to Moses to say:

“My lord Moses, stop them!”

It seems that Eldad and Medad still get excluded from the inner circle.

Now, you might be saying:

Well, Jeff, I am certainly not a racist or a sexist.

But, we make inner circles and gangs in *other* places in our lives as well. At our work, we establish quickly who is on the bosses’ side and who is on our side.

At our school, we organize into clubs and fraternities and cliques, so that it will be easy to figure out who is in and who is out.

In our families, we silently determine who is the black sheep, and then we subtly let them know that they are at the root and cause of every family problem.

Teddy’s Gang is still alive and well.

And, Eldad and Medad are still prophesying, outside of the tent of meeting.

But, the good news, my friends, is that Jesus is constantly opening up the circle, opening up the tent.

Jesus is constantly drawing in the Eldads and the Medads and re-drawing the boundaries to include people, people like you and like me.

For, in the First Letter of Peter, we read:

“You are chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people...

Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people."¹

When we are *outside* the inner circle, when we are Eldad and Medad prophesying outside the tent, Jesus transforms all of us into a *new* people, into God's own people.

And, when we are *inside* the inner circle, God asks us to lay aside our insecurity and jealousy to re-draw and open up our boundaries to others.

For, we have not been chosen to be in Teddy's Gang.
We have not been chosen to be in Moses' Gang.
We have been chosen to be God's own people.

All of us have been chosen - to be in God's Gang.

AMEN.

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¹ 1 Peter 2: 9-10