

“Holy Loose Cannons”
Numbers 11:16-17, 24-30
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If you go to Roselawn Cemetery in San Antonio, Texas and you wander around long enough you'll come to a very interesting headstone. What is interesting is that it is the only headstone turned perpendicular to all the rest of the thousands of headstones in Roselawn. It so happened that when mechanized lawn mowing came to Roselawn Cemetery, the owners contacted all of the known owners of the plots and requested that all the headstones be turned the same direction to more easily facilitate the new grass cutting machines. It seemed like a reasonable request. But there was one little old lady who refused to have her husband's headstone changed from its original location and it was the proverbial case of the irresistible force meeting the immovable object. You know who won. Now, what you should *also* know is that the headstone presently under discussion belongs to none other than Henry Howard Grace, my grandfather, and it remains to this day contrary and perpendicular to the rest. The tendency to go against the grain runs deep in my family.

And so now you may have a little more insight as to why I like stories like the one I read from Numbers in which Moses embodies a contrarian spirit with which my grandmother might identify. Moses is willing to go against the grain, so that God's spirit might fall upon all of the people. In the midst of the story of Eldad

and Medad, those two elders among the seventy who missed the roll call at the tent of meeting and found themselves prophesying in the most public, and seemingly unlikely, of places, we find God's chosen leader Moses, who decides that the risk of a loose cannon or two on deck is worth it. A loose cannon, of course, is usually perceived as a dangerous thing; sailing ship captains lived in dread fear of what a several thousand pound cannon loose on deck could do to the seaworthiness of their ship. But Moses sees through the danger to its potential; he knew that more dangerous than a prophet loose in the camp, was a prophet stuck in the tent of meeting.

The story about the seventy elders in Numbers takes place in the midst of a hue and cry from a rabble rousing portion of the Israelites clamoring for food. They have been liberated from captivity in Egypt but they still manage to complain about their misfortune. O, they wail, we had it so much better in Egypt where we ate cucumbers and melons and leeks and onions and garlic. Now all we have to eat is this manna. We want meat and we want it now! And poor Moses bears the brunt of their complaining and he cries out to the Lord for some help dealing with these ungrateful people. "I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me," says Moses and God promises some assistance in the form of seventy of Israel's best men. Bring them to the tent of meeting, God says, and you shall have your burdens shared.

Now it so happens that our two protagonists, Eldad and Medad, have failed to appear at the appointed hour. Everyone else is lined up in the tent of meeting, outside the camp, but our two heroes are malingering back in the camp. We don't know if they were late, or if they were just reluctant, but when God appears in a cloud as promised, sixty-eight elders in the tent, and those two foot-draggers in the camp, receive a portion of the spirit that was on Moses and they all begin to prophesy, dancing about in an ecstatic frenzy, perhaps speaking in tongues, but most importantly, glorifying the Lord who has visited them. They are overwhelmed with the nearness of God and charged up to be those who will help Moses lead the people. But two of them are not where they are supposed to be, a fact not lost on the young man who feels it is his duty to tattle on poor Eldad and Medad who probably don't even know what has hit them. And Joshua runs to Moses and implores him to do something quickly, because there are these two nutcases out in the camp acting like they have received the Holy Spirit. Indeed they *had* received the spirit and Moses is quick to put Joshua in his place. Those two holy loose cannons, Eldad and Medad, caused all kinds of trouble in the camp that day but their adventures show us some interesting things which may help us appreciate all the more this Pentecost.

The first lesson we might take from the apparent scandal caused by Eldad and Medad prophesying outside the confines of the tent of meeting is that God's works extend further than our religious buildings after all, and once touched by

God, there is no denying the experience. Eldad and Medad began prophesying right there on the street. Imagine that! People announcing the glory of God outside the proverbial stained glass windows. What a scandal! In many of the countries from which we come, a real or de facto separation of church and state has given us the impression that religion is supposed to be a private affair, reserved for sanctuaries and cathedrals, not the public sphere, in the street and shop. But let us not confuse private with personal. Indeed, what is suggested by the prophesying of Eldad and Medad is that our glorification of God *cannot* and *must not* be confined within the four walls of the church. Eldad's and Medad's efforts in the camp remind us that our faith belongs in every arena of our lives and not just in church on Sunday. Our faith is empowered by the same Holy Spirit that charged up Eldad and Medad. This is the spirit that moves us to help women escape prostitution, and children finish school. This is the spirit that moves us to struggle against racism and poverty. This is the spirit that moves us to make Christ known to people who are suffering, or in the words of the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, to "the least, the last, and the lost." This is the spirit that moves us to do our best each and every day, even when we don't feel like it.

If that weren't enough, we are reminded that those loose cannons Eldad and Medad are affirmed by Moses who expresses his wish that *all* the people of Israel might prophesy, that *all* might testify to the nearness of God. Moses is not worried that loose cannons will mess up his sweet deal with God. Moses is not concerned

that his authority will be trampled upon. He is only interested in leading the people as God directs him. Moses reminds us that God's giving of the spirit is not limited to a few select invitees, the cream of the Israelite crop, so to speak. One of my seminary professors called this the "democratization of prophesy," the kind to be found in the last days such as the prophet Joel announced when he said, "I will pour out my spirit on *all* flesh." Moses may well have been an influence behind the Protestant Reformers' idea of the priesthood of all believers, the idea that each of us has a unique relationship with the creator that is not mediated by a priest who happens to wear a cassock. You see, in this passage in Numbers, Moses expresses a hope for the "prophethood" of all believers, the idea that each of us is touched by God's Holy Spirit and is called to glorify God in whatever we do. It doesn't matter where we live or work or play, just so long as we prophesy wherever we may be. Sometimes we will be in the tent, in sync with all the rest, and sometimes in the camp, being loose cannons, but we'd better be prophesying wherever we are. "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets," says Moses, "and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!"

All of this is to say that even though it is easy to be afraid of the unknown, we need to take it on faith that God knows what God is doing. Should we think that it is some accident that Eldad and Medad "got the spirit" even though they were in the wrong place at the wrong time? Or should we think that they received it for a purpose, to show God's people something about God's spirit? Jesus rightly noted

that a prophet is not without honor except in his hometown, a reminder that not only are loose cannons a fact of life, but that they are not always appreciated. There will always be people and congregations who prophesy a little differently than others who are also called by God. And there will always be Joshuas who will wish to deny the validity of the prophesy of others. It is a challenge before the church to let God, rather than Joshua, determine upon whom God will rest the spirit and where that spirit will lead people to prophesy. It is a challenge before the church to make room in the church for its loose cannons, even if it makes for some uncomfortable moments.

One of my favorite movies is one called *Mass Appeal* and it is the story of two Catholic priests, one who is older and rather complacent but a survivor, and one who is young and idealistic and might be considered a loose cannon. Jack Lemmon, who is my favorite actor, plays Father Farley, the older priest who has been given the task of teaching the younger priest, Mark Dolson, some tact. The movie comes to a climax around the church hierarchy's decision to get rid of Mark because of his controversial views and his challenges to the authority of the hierarchy. To the hierarchy, this younger priest is prophesying in the camp, not in the tent, and he must be silenced before he can do any damage. To the older priest, his younger colleague is exhibiting prophesy the likes of which Moses would approve. And before Mark's crucial meeting with his superior, Father Farley cautions him to lie about his past so that he can remain a priest. In this scene,

Father Farley says something to Mark that could not be more Pentecostal in light of our subject today. He says, “I see now why you need to be a priest — because you’re a lunatic. Oh, Mark, you’re one of those priceless lunatics who comes along every so often and keeps the church alive!”

Father Farley is so right. It is the loose cannons of the Church who keep it alive and keep it a blessing to the world in Christ’s name. From Saint Paul preaching to the Gentiles to Saint Benedict selling all his possessions and living in poverty preaching the Gospel, to Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses to the door of the church at Wittenburg to Harry Emerson Fosdick asking “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” in the 1920s to Martin Luther King Jr. chastising the moderate White church in the US for not opposing segregation — it has been loose cannons who have renewed the church and reminded it of the message proclaimed by Christ. Eldad and Medad are but the first in a long line of loose cannons empowered by the Holy Spirit. We heard tonight about other loose cannons empowered by the Holy Spirit on the first Christian Pentecost, and see how they changed the world! On this Pentecost, let us not only embrace and encourage our loose cannons and pray they are never silenced, but let us also be loose cannons ourselves, giving witness to the gift of the Holy Spirit, and testifying everywhere to the glory of God. Amen.