

Missing the Mission?

Numbers 11: 24-29

Mark 9: 38-50

This has been a tough season for the San Francisco Giants, for whom I've rooted, cheered, and often bemoaned for 50 years. They've been decimated by injuries this year. It's a small wonder that the Giants didn't sink to the bottom of their division, but they hung tough until this month when things fell apart amid more injuries.

In this dismal season, one of the bright spots has been a skinny kid named Matt Duffy. After appearing in just a few games at the end of last season, Duffy was on the roster at the start of the 2015 season as a back-up infielder. In fill-in roles, he showed he could hit. But the Giants had a problem at third base, not second or shortstop where Duffy was familiar with playing.

The third baseman they had acquired in the off season, Casey McGehee, was doing terribly. His fielding wasn't anything special, and his hitting was just plain terrible. They decided to start trying Duffy at third base.

[Duffy wrote an article](#) about his experience of joining the Giants at the end of the 2014 season. He acknowledges being in total awe of everyone and everything. Quickly, the stars of the team, the ones he had idolized as a kid, came up to him and welcomed him to the team, told him how valuable he would be, and how they looked forward to the contributions he would make. It made a big impression. He was told right away that he belonged, and that message was reinforced at every opportunity.

He goes on to recount how this season, even the horrible hitting third baseman, Casey McGehee, whose job he would possibly take, wished him well and would work with him, giving him tips on fielding at third base (known as the "hot corner") what to watch for in batters, and what to keep aware of in certain situations. When McGehee was finally sent down to the minors in June (and eventually released), McGehee immediately told Duffy privately that he held no grudge, that Duffy had fully earned the spot, and he was glad that Duffy had done so well.

What Duffy relates about the Giants is the nature of its culture that values what they produce together, how they stand with each other, and how they support and encourage one another. Their mission is to win games, using the contributions of whoever comes along and whatever happens, to learn and improve and hang together. Everyone has a role, and everyone contributes to what they produce. There is a mission, and all contribute, whether they've been on the team for years, or are brand new. Everyone belongs.

In religious and spiritual terms, this gets more problematic. Rather than donning a particular team jersey, we have a different set of qualifiers that are supposed to determine whether you're on *our* team or not. It's Presbyterians, not Methodists or Baptists or Lutherans or Episcopalians. It's Christians, not Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, or

Hindus. It's definitely not atheists or members of one of those other groups that don't fall neatly into one team or another.

A big reason for this is that we invariably begin making assumptions about God and me – never a smart approach when we assume to know the mind of God. We may think that God is on my team. My way is the right one, the only one, and that must mean the rest are wrong and God really doesn't acknowledge them or their worth.

That leads to the next failure; assuming that God's mission in the world is all about us, our blessing, our well-being, our privilege above the rest of the human rabble and their faultiness. The scope of God's mission can't be bigger than my team, could it?

Looking first at the passage from Numbers, we find a frustrated Moses has just had a mighty rant at God. Moses is fed up to here with these insufferable, whiny people, certain that if they had all they wanted, they'd still complain that it wasn't enough. Moses needs help to deal with the cranky group of wanderers. He brings the elders to the Tent, the tabernacle – their mobile worship center.

As the presence of the Lord came down, Moses was somehow able to take the Spirit of God and place it on the seventy elders present. The result was that the elders began prophesying. We don't know exactly what such prophesying means here in the Old Testament any more than knowing exactly what happened at Pentecost. In any case, the 70 are put in an exceptional spiritual state. It happened only this one time.

Now, 70 is an unusual number because it lacks numeric symbolism. It would be much better if the number were a divisor of twelve. Well, then we discover that 2 of the elders didn't go to the tent of meeting, the tabernacle. Ah, now it makes sense – there were supposed to be 72 elders there!

The center of attention in the text now turns to the 2 delinquent elders. Moses' act to place the Spirit on the elders somehow went outside the tent and even reached the 2 missing elders, Medad and Eldad. They begin prophesying much to the surprise of a young observer who runs over to Joshua, Moses' right hand guy. He tells Joshua about it, and Joshua is appalled. Joshua urges Moses to stop them from prophesying. Moses dismisses his complaint by saying that he wished **all** of God's people were prophesying, and that was the end of the matter.

Joshua saw the gift of prophecy as a strange, special privilege, granted to a special few. The 2 absent elders had missed the big event. They weren't on the inside, belonging to the select group. There was something wrong about them prophesying outside the bounds of the sanctuary.

Moreover, Joshua may have thought that this sacred gift from Moses was a property, a possession that Moses actually handed out – not far from how it's described in the text, that Moses **distributed** the Spirit of God onto the elders. These 2 absent elders possessed something that they had **not** actually been given. In Joshua's view, this "theft" of the Spirit should be rectified by Moses, by taking away the gift of the Spirit.

On the other hand, Moses realized that this gift of prophecy was a blessing. It wasn't Moses' blessing; it was God's. Moses chose to share this blessing, not claim it as his property. A lesser individual might have tried to claim it as their personal possession. Not Moses who knew that any gift from God was meant to be shared as a blessing for all. That's a helpful attitude, a faithful attitude, recognizing God's desire for **all** to enjoy every sacred blessing. Joshua missed the mission here and was taught by Moses to celebrate God's blessing which is meant for all.

Such an attitude would have been beneficial for the disciples to adopt as we turn to the passage in Mark. Here again, the disciples have been on a streak of missing the message and hence the mission. That wrong-headedness won't change just yet.

Here, John, son of Zebedee, in a rare moment of actually speaking in Mark, has seen a man driving out demons in the name of Jesus. Like Joshua in the previous passage, John believes that man needs to stop. John makes his reasoning clear; "because he is **not** one of us." Ah, so you need to be "one of us" to do good things in the name of Jesus. John, too, has missed the mission, believing that doing the good works of Jesus is exclusive to the disciples alone. Only authorized club members should be allowed to do things that Jesus wants done.

Like Moses dismissing Joshua, Jesus dismisses John's complaint. He ends his remarks saying the rather obscure, "Anyone who gives a cup of water in my name will certainly not lose their reward." It comes out not sounding quite right. What Jesus means is that someone who is helping those who help Jesus, who may give the disciples a drink of water when they are thirsty, will not be condemned for their thoughtful action, in other words not be condemned for simply **not** being "one of us."

Jesus has always been aware that his mission and ministry must be bigger than his single presence, hence these disciples. And his disciples also must learn that Jesus' mission and ministry *must* be greater than *their* number if it's to have any lasting impact. In fact, that someone would be doing such a thing in Jesus' name should be a cause of celebration, not condemnation.

Jesus also says, *Whoever is not against us is for us*. Jesus' words reach out to embrace and include others (those *not against us*) while still showing awareness of the clear and identifiable threats to this ministry.

This has been a further stumble by the disciples. Their attitude causes Jesus to have an extended rant of his own, using some extreme examples to make a point. These dismemberment verses are meant figuratively, not literally. The violently harsh examples are intended to focus the disciples' attention on what their role is **in relation to the Kingdom of God**. You catch this key Kingdom reference point when Jesus said: *It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell.*

It is not about protecting some imagined turf from people who are actually helping the movement and doing its work. Rather the warning is not to be some screw-up who misrepresents what Jesus' ministry is all about, thereby misleading one of the "little ones" into sin, or repelling them away from Jesus' ministry. Better you should lose a hand, a foot, or an eye than let such an abomination occur, a corruption of what Jesus intended and thereby a loss of Jesus' promise of new life.

What would this corruption look like? We have plenty of examples in very popular Christian figures today. We have folks who spew hate for Jews, Muslims and anyone who is not a Christian, or even their type of Christian. We have predatory preachers who are tirelessly fleecing their flock of money. We have good Christian folks who defend oppression and condemn efforts to overcome it. These folks are missing the mission. The focal point of Jesus' good news is to break through barriers with love and compassion, not erect new ones that diminish others and promote ways contrary to the Kingdom.

Jesus wants us to keep this message before us, *Whoever is not against us is for us*. Jesus would have us recognize that those who are doing the work of ministry just as Jesus had instructed, even though they are not Christians by profession of faith, are nonetheless serving the will of God. The Jew who is sharing a mitzvah – a blessing, or the Muslim who is acting charitably, or the Hindu who feeds the poor, or the Buddhist who calls for peace, all of these different faiths must be pretty sharp because they seem to have heard Jesus' words, and offer an image of Jesus' way in their own way. And there are even those with no professed religious motivation who act selflessly in ministering to the least of God's beloved. These, too, will not be condemned for their compassionate work. Finally, even those whom society at times may regard as unworthy can also act as Jesus would want his best servants to model in their witness to the world.

Let's be sure we realize that our faith and our ministry are never ours. Our mission must always seek to be an extension and reflection of the way of our Lord. We do not possess this mission as our unique commodity, something we must jealously guard, ration, or restrict to suit our own narrow purposes. To do so invites corruption, exploiting what has been entrusted to us for unworthy purposes. Better that we should lose an arm or a leg than corrupt the way and the word of the Lord.

May we realize that God's work is our responsibility, and yet we are **not** alone in sacred service. God has called all of his creation to such service, finding many ways to draw servants from all walks and traditions to perform his will and advance his Kingdom promise of life. Woe to us if we should miss the mission because we're focused on the wrong thing. Many in God's creation strive in their own way to work to heal and reconcile, to bring peace, justice, and new life to all. That is the mission we all share.