

**St. John's Cathedral**  
Jackson, Mississippi  
Sermon for September 30, 2018 ~ Proper 21B  
The Very Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

Today's readings from the Book of Numbers and the Gospel of Mark each provide us with a biblical sandwich. That is, a story in three parts. Like a sandwich, when all the parts are assembled, we get the full effect or meaning. In both stories, the layers of the sandwich are conflict, authority, and judgment.

In the reading from Book of Numbers, the first layer is conflict in the form of a food crisis. The people are complaining about the lack of meat. They're tired of eating only the manna from heaven. Their cries are getting to be too much for Moses – and apparently for God as well. The people begin to pine for days in Egypt when they ate free food – cucumbers and melons, leeks, onions, and garlic. God is outraged at all the chatter, and Moses is frustrated – how is he supposed to deal with this rabble? So soon the hardships of slavery have been forgotten. How is the conflict to be resolved?

The answer is found in sharing power. That's the second layer of the sandwich and has to do with authority and who has it. In answer to Moses' dilemma, God takes some of the spirit that is residing on Moses and places it on seventy elders of the tribes, so that they can share the burden. Spread the authority around and make the community less of an autocracy.

The third layer comes when Joshua gets upset that two who remained in camp had started prophesying without the proper ordination and complains to Moses. However, in Moses' judgment, it would be good if God's Spirit would fall upon everyone and all would be prophets. Prophets reveal the heart of God and offer a vision of what will come to pass when God's people are faithful. Sometimes, prophets also offer a vision of what will happen if God's people are not faithful. The witness of this biblical sandwich is clear – this is a journey we share together, and leadership is shared as well, and often with people we least expect.

Many scholars believe that today's sandwich in the Gospel of Mark is a parallel to the Numbers passage. The first sandwich layer in the gospel actually began last week with the argument of the disciples over who would be greatest. Jesus addressed that conflict by explaining that, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." He illustrated his point by placing a child in their midst and saying, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

The second layer comes when young John comes to Jesus, much like young Joshua came to Moses, raising concerns about unauthorized agents taking up duties seemingly assigned to the inner circle. How soon John forgot the lesson about what authority looks like under God's reign. "We saw people, he says, throwing out demons and such in your name so we tried to stop them because they weren't part of our club." But Jesus, like Moses, responds, "don't be an impediment to the Spirit. If they're doing powerful works in my name, then they won't be cursing me." And here's a word for our own day – "whoever isn't against us is for us." We try to limit whom God can empower and through whom God can work, but Jesus seems to rest content in the knowledge that God will do what God will do. The point is doing something consistent with what God has called everyone to do. So, if they give you a cup of water because you're mine, then they'll be rewarded.

The third layer in this section of the gospel is when Jesus speaks of the judgment that will come to any of his followers who become stumbling blocks. Verses 42-50 are difficult to hear. It's a grotesque set of statements, and yet in the midst of this difficult passage, we hear a message – “don't cause any of my children to stumble. Don't be an impediment. Instead, be salt.” Why salt? Think of the properties of salt, then and now. Salt was valuable, so valuable that Roman soldiers who were “worth their salt” were paid with it. Salt adds flavor. Salt is a preservative. Salt purifies. The followers of Jesus are supposed to offer those qualities to the world. After all, we're all in this together, and when we're salt that retains its saltiness, then we can become a means of peace in the world.

Take these two similar biblical sandwiches home with you today and chew on them this week. They give us valuable lessons in how to be a community of Christ's followers.

Whenever there is conflict, we are to seek divine wisdom and guidance so that the bonds of our community may be strengthened. When conflict arises in the Church, we are to draw upon the resources God gives us to resolve it in healthy ways guided by the love of God. Then, conflict can be resolved with the salt of friendship rather than becoming a source of bitterness and division. If our life as a community of believers is one of love, healing, and hope, we will change the world.

While authority is given to clergy and staff, it is given to be shared with the entire community so that all may be equipped, empowered, and built up for the work of ministry. The restoration of commissions, committees, and other ministry groups at St. Andrew's is not so they can help the clergy and staff do their jobs. It is so the clergy and staff can help this community of Christians carry out Christ's work in the mission field where we have been placed. So each of us is to work, pray, and give for the spread of the Kingdom of God.

In all things, let us remember that, in the judgment of Moses and Jesus, we are not the only people whom God has anointed with the Holy Spirit. The Bible, the best of Christian teaching through the ages, reason, and experience indicate that God has made a universe that is big enough for everybody. Our job is to share the love of God and to respect others who may be doing that in a different way. The word of judgment for us is this; if we do not, we are in danger of becoming stumbling blocks; if we do, we will know the joy of becoming stepping-stones.

We are a kingdom of priests. The Latin word for priest is *pontifex*, meaning “bridge builder.” When enough stepping-stones are joined together, we can build bridges over which God's children can cross on their journey toward God. I've always loved this brief bit of poetry by R. Lee Sharpe:

Isn't it strange that princes and kings  
and clowns that caper in sawdust rings.  
and common people like you and me  
are builders for eternity?

Each is given a bag of tools,  
a shapeless mass, a book of rules.  
And each must make, e're life is flown  
a stumbling block or a stepping stone.