

Trinity Episcopal Cathedral Sermon  
September 27, 2009 - The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost  
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We've had a string of tough Scripture, haven't we? (laughter....) We're supposed to be preaching the Good News here...let's look for it. Especially when Jesus says: "Everyone will be salted with fire." Everyone--all of us, will have challenges that feel like destruction...and devastation. It's promised; we have it right here in Scripture.

As I read these three passages of Scripture together, and look for the common ground, there is something that stands out...in terms of the fire...the challenge...that we face. I think it's intended to highlight that for us this morning. I'm thinking of spiritual "stuckness." Oh, I know YOU never get stuck, but I'm an expert at it. It's like the writer with writer's block...it just doesn't quite work. And if you're not sure what spiritual stuckness is like, we have some illustrations today.

If you look in the Gospel, one of the ways you would know that you're spiritually stuck, is you act like the disciples. Someone does something perfectly good--to serve God--and you criticize them, because you don't quite see it. So, if you ever move into that place...you might go into that reflective place in your heart...and acknowledge that you're stuck.

Or James has a great one. James talks basically about someone I read, in preparing, called it "armored speech." "Armored speech" -- your speech is like a tank. Keeps you safe...unless you fire at other people. Ever do that one? Sort of, take a whack at someone else, in a way that you are completely behind armor. "Armored speech." If you ever fall into that, you might consider that it's actually you who are stuck--not the knucklehead you are trying to correct.

Or again, with Moses...you have these people--the two, who stay back--who are prophesying, doing an amazing revelation of God's heart and desire...making it known to people. But they weren't in the tent - and they should be "in the tent" to do that. Again--that little legalistic "us vs. them." These are the kind of "stuckness," actually, that come from people who are really deep in their faith. This is a downfall for mature practitioners of Christianity, that are trying to live in two worlds at once: the city of God, and the city of humans, as Augustin called it. This is the downfall that many of us fall into--that kind of "stuckness". We're so focused on serving God, that we get stuck, and we can't find our way out.

Today, Moses shows us the way. Moses got stuck. But notice how Moses got stuck. When Moses got stuck, he went right to God. Now, as your pastor, I have been able and privileged to see into your lives, and I certainly see into my own. And I can say that, when most of us here are "stuck," we go to God in a way that is different than Moses. We go to God with guilt and shame, and self-blame. And we know that we're the worst thing in the world. We may practice "armored speech," but on the inside, we're crumbling. That's not how Moses does it, does he? Moses goes to God, as if God is his partner, and says: "Look! You need to uphold your side of the deal here,

Partner...and you're not! And I'm dying here--help me out!" That's language of partnership. And so, Moses show us, that one of the ways that we can reflect on our lives when we get stuck, is "Who is God?" Your prayers alone will tell you, who you think God is. For Moses, God is his partner--someone who walks with him...someone who is ever-present in the daily, ordinary times of his life. A lot of my "stuck" prayers, are dealing with a distant, disinterested Deity, who...you know, "Lord! Don't forget me!" I move so far out of that partnership that Moses calls us into. And, some of you do too.

So, Moses calls us back, back into our relationship with God...that is a genuine partnership...a co-creation with God. And then reminds us that we are focused on moving, moving towards a different place than we are now. Moses was going to the Promised Land. Maybe you're moving towards Heaven...the Promised Land. Mindfulness. Awakeness. We are all moving. We are people that have a goal. And in that goal, God is our partner. When you forget that, you get "stuck." And that is when that "armored speech," or that "divide and conquer" comes in.

So Moses show us that relationship with God. That internal relationship through his prayer and his dialogue. But he also shows us a way forward in our lives. Even though Moses was completely connected with God, in a way that you and I strive to be, even then--Moses needed others around him. He came to understand, in his dialogue with God, that he needed seventy people. That's a big number! He needed seventy people to help him, and to keep him awake, and part of this journey that he's on. He couldn't do it alone.

And so it is with you, and with me, isn't it? Do you know who your council of seventy elders is? I hope you walk out of here knowing that you need seventy. If Moses needs seventy, we probably need seven hundred! But let's leave it at seventy. Who are they? Who are your council of elders? Can you name seventy? Moses could. I can't, when I try to do it for me. And I think maybe that is the point. If you go into a quiet place today, and count up your seventy elders--the people you need to help you stay on track, --and you have a gap... Let's say you get to thirty-eight... That might be the point. Because then it's going to keep you awake as you travel through your days. Because you haven't met all your elders yet. And you're got some that are "to meet." You need to keep your eyes open if you do not have seventy...for God's delightful surprise. You will find that seventy, as you live a life of authentic Christian practice. But some of those seventy are still out, maybe there to surprise you.

James helps us see how that surprise might come. At the end of the reading we have today, James talks about that person who corrects someone else in a godly way--not in a prideful way. Paul calls it "speaking the truth in love." Have you ever had one of those conversations? They're not really comfortable...when someone is going to set you right. And they're undefended! They're not trying to destroy you, or knock you over. They're undefended. They're simply coming to you humbly and openly, because they see something, that would help you. As my mentor used to say: "Bill, sometimes when people have a problem with you, you are the problem." And it works the same with you.

One of the ways we get out of our “stuckness” is...one of our council of seventy comes to us. And so we focus on that council of elders. Each of you has it, each of you needs it. But here’s the thing: if each of you has a council of seventy elders...there’s a good chance you’re on someone else’s council. So remember...it’s not all about you, or about me. Sometimes we’re available to someone else, and they call us in. Just like Moses did with those seventy. Don’t you think those seventy had plans? Don’t you think they were ready to fit in their day, and suddenly Moses calls them into a whole new place. Are you available to others in that way? I believe that’s a question coming out of Scripture today. How do make your own self available...not only to manage your “stuckness,” but to be open to others? One of the ways we manage our “stuckness” is by being brought in to someone else’s life, and being available to them, and beholden to them.

So we live a difficult life, in difficult times, and the tough love from Scripture comes to us, calling us, to go deep in our hearts and our relationship with God...and then to reach out to others. But not only reach out, but to be available when others reach out to us. I pray that you go ever deeper in your spiritual life...that you find those elders who are ready and waiting...available to you. But never forget - you’re on someone else’s list, as well.