

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
The Reverend John H. Brock

October 1, 2006
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Psalm 19:7-14;
James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

We have a couple of different thoughts running through our lessons this morning. First, from James, is the whole idea of “don’t just sit there, do something”. That idea is very deeply ingrained into our American psyche. How many of us were brought up (or are bringing up our children) on the whole theology of the Protestant work ethic? Many, many times I have spoken to people who are in need or who are in a situation where they could benefit from the food bank or the social work system or welfare, but they refuse to take part in those support systems because, as they have said to me, “I can’t accept something for nothing”. (Now admittedly, there are those who abuse the system, but that’s a whole different topic and an entirely different subject.)

Those systems, though, were set up to assist honest, hard-working folk who have come on a bad time. And there are many people who are involved in the system who do not want to be there; they want to be working but, because of some physical limitation or chemical imbalance in their brain or some type of challenge they face on a daily basis, they just are not able to do a day’s labor for a day’s pay. Still James reminds them, don’t just sit there, do something. And along with the idea of doing something comes the idea of some reward. Are you suffering, James asks? Then pray. Are you cheerful? Sing. Are you sick? Then call on others and have them pray. Have you sinned? Confess, and be forgiven and be healed.

From our lessons from Numbers and the gospel, we get the idea of fair play. I know that is something that pulls very strongly in the Brock household, especially with a fifth and a sixth grader that I know. We have had many discussions as to what is and what is not fair. Now I happen to think that the rule “no television or video games until your homework is done” is a very fair rule (however, there is often disagreement on that subject). But despite that rule, I often times hear, when one has finished his homework and the other has not, “Why is he watching television?” and my answer is “Because he has done his homework!” Which inevitably brings the reply . . . wait for it . . . “That’s not fair!” to which I answer, “Yes. It is fair. It is fair because your brother came home, got a snack, sat down at the table, did his math (maybe struggled with his math), then we talked about that not very good grade he got in a geography test last week, but in twenty-five minutes, he got his homework done.” And I proceed with the child who is complaining, “If you would put as much effort into doing your homework, as you do complaining about it and not doing it and devising schemes to get out of doing it, then you would be finished too, and you could be watching television or playing the Game Cube, and that would be fair.” We, the American people, as a culture, believe very strongly in fair play.

And so, like the young man in Numbers, and like John talking to Jesus, when we see someone benefiting from something they have not taken part in, our sense of fair play kicks in, and we want to complain.

In our first lesson this morning, the story at this point is that the people of Israel are on the move; they've left Egypt and are on their way to the Promised Land. They have been living for some time on manna. (We're not exactly sure what manna was; but apparently it was some type of leavening used for baking bread.) But these folks are carnivores. They want meat. And so the people of Israel start to whine to Moses; they say, "Moses, we want meat!"

Poor Moses. He is only one guy, and he's in charge of this entire herd of whiners and he can't do it all by himself, so Moses in turn prays to God. Moses prays for two things: first he prays for some help, and then he asks for meat. God responds. "Alright Moses. You need help; here's what I'm gonna do. Gather the people together, and gather seventy leaders from among them; bring them together at the tent, and wait and trust in me and I will send my spirit upon them."

Then God responds (we didn't hear this part this morning – you might want to read this part when you get home today): "If the people want meat, I'll give them meat! I'll give them enough meat not just for one day, not just for two days, not for five or ten or twenty days – I'll give them a month's worth of meat! I'll give them so much meat it will be coming out of their nostrils; they'll be stuffed sick with meat!" Don't mess with God! (Hold onto this thought; we'll get back to it in a minute.)

It's not fair. It's not fair that these two guys down in the camp who weren't there at the tent – they weren't supposed to get the spirit. They didn't fill out the paperwork. They weren't present at the meeting with the other guys who did what they were supposed to do. But a young man sees them and hears them prophesying, and he goes running up to Moses, "Moses! Moses! Eldad and Medad are prophesying!" And Joshua, one of Moses' assistants, says "Moses, make them stop!" To which Moses responds, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!" (Numbers 11:29)

A similar thing happens in our gospel lesson this morning. John, down in the village, saw somebody else healing people, healing people in the name of Jesus! Of all the gall – going around healing people in the name of Jesus when you're not part of the "in" crowd; when you haven't been there all along – and you're going around healing people? This has got to stop! This isn't fair. He's not one of us! But Jesus said to John, "Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us." (Mark 9:39-40)

Just like John and that young man and Joshua, we think that it's not fair. It's not fair that Eldad and Medad were out doing things; they hadn't taken the course, they hadn't passed the test, so why should they benefit when they hadn't done the work? It's just not fair!

You know what else isn't fair? When I have more than enough, and I don't share with those who don't have enough. It's not fair that I throw out my excess, rather than give it to those who could use it.

Do you remember the lesson from James from a couple of weeks ago, when he told us "If our brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep

warm and eat your fill,’ and yet we do not supply the bodily needs”, what is the good of that?” (James 2:15-16) How fair are we?

In the second lesson today, James calls us to action. James reminds us that life isn’t fair. It’s not fair because this stuff we call “sin” gets into our lives and messes things up; it messes up our relationship with God; it messes up my relationship with you; and it messes up your relationship with people in your lives. We do get sick. We do suffer. We do sin. And, James reminds us, we can be cheerful. Don’t just sit there. Pray. Life isn’t fair, so don’t just sit there – reach out to those people who are in need. Life isn’t always going to go the way we want it to – we will get sick; people we love will get sick; maybe we’ll learn to hate our job; maybe we’ll fail that test, which causes us to fail the class and puts us behind in school. Life isn’t fair.

When we’re the ones who are down . . . when I am the one who is down, I need to remember to reach out to those around me for the help that I need. I need to learn, I need to remember to lean on you when I am in trouble, and I need be there to help you when you are in trouble. Because we can’t do it by ourselves.

Moses knew that. Moses knew that when he asked God to help him lead the people. Moses asked for help and . . . oh yeah . . . Moses received help.

James realized that. Are you suffering? Pray. Are you cheerful? Sing! If not for yourself, then for all of us. Because God will answer prayer.

Do you remember from the Old Testament about the meat? They got meat. God sent quail. Not only that, God sent so much quail the quail drifted six feet high! They got meat. God answers our prayers. Maybe not with the answer we want, or maybe not in the manner we expect, but God answers our prayers, and God says, “You know, you’re right. Life isn’t fair. But neither am I. Because if I was fair,” God says, “I would not have sent my Son to die for **YOU**”

So now God says to each of us here, “You go forth, and you don’t be fair, either. Reach out to those people whom you think don’t deserve it. Don’t be fair, be like me”, God says, “act like me. Don’t just sit there – do something! Go and do likewise.”