

31 August 2025

What Have We Learned This Summer?

Numbers 11:24-30; Mark 9:38-40

We have two scripture readings this morning, the first from the Book of Numbers, chapter 11, verses 24-30:

²⁴So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord; and he gathered seventy elders of the people, and placed them all around the tent. ²⁵Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again.

²⁶Two men remained in the camp, one named Eldad, and the other named Medad, and the spirit rested on them; they were among those registered, but they had not gone out to the tent, and so they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷And a young man ran and told Moses, 'Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.' ²⁸And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, 'My lord Moses, stop them!' ²⁹But Moses said to him, '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!' ³⁰And Moses and the elders of Israel returned to the camp.

Our second reading is from the Gospel of Mark chapter 9, verses 38-40.

³⁸John said to [Jesus], 'Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.' ³⁹But Jesus said, 'Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us.

I have a few prepared remarks today, but I don't want to just preach. I want to begin with a conversation. You and I both have just had an unusual summer of church. Since I last preached here, on June 1, I have been on sabbatical. I basically spent a month traveling, a month writing, and a month reading. You spent three months with sermons being preached mostly by laity within the church, worship being led by other laity and volunteer musicians and by a part-time interim, committees being led by their chairs, pastoral care being done by friends within the congregation, and the church's outreach ministries going on as if they hadn't noticed I was gone. Thank you to those preachers, committee chairs, outreach leaders like Kent and Peter, church staff – especially Edna and Ellen and Laurie – and a special thank you to our Lay Leader, Greg Wallace, who held it all together. We were all stretched, but as far as I can tell from physical evidence, all went pretty well. Now, before we snap back to our previous comfort level, I want to spend some time thinking about what we might have discovered about ourselves and this church while we were stretching.

So, my first question. *Why did you come to church this summer?* There is a widely-held belief that the pastor is one of, if not *the*, most important draws for church attendance. (At least widely-held among clergy.) But I checked the numbers, and attendance this summer was the same as last summer. So why? [Discuss. Giving about the same, too. Same ministries going.]

Second, *were there new things that happened this summer in my absence that you would like to see continue?* [Discuss: ways of doing communal prayer? Other elements of worship? Anything from committees?]

Third, *were there things that stopped during the summer that you missed?* A friend of mine, some twenty years ago, was appointed to a struggling congregation near Stevens Point. She did something remarkable. She discontinued every program except Sunday morning worship for a year, and at the end of that year asked the congregation: “Now, what did you miss?” This was just a few months – months when a lot of things take a break anyway – but I thought I’d ask. [Discuss. Me: MAP.]

Fourth, *were there things that stopped that you did not miss?* [Discuss]

Let’s take a minute to look at our scriptures – sort of companion scriptures from the Old and New Testaments, both of them about the rise of unexpected leaders. In Numbers we heard a story about Moses. He had finally worked out an organizational chart and recruited leaders from the people of Israel, and the Lord blessed those leaders. The Spirit of God fell on them and they prophesied. But then two other people in the camp also began to prophesy, and Moses’ second-in-command Joshua is aghast. “Moses! Make them stop! They didn’t come to staff orientation!” And Moses replies, “Are you worried about me? Jealous for my sake? Get a grip! I wish there were more! I wish *everybody* was a prophet!”

One of the challenges facing the American church today is the professionalization of the clergy. Now, it’s not wrong to have people with specialized training who are paid to lead churches. There have been such people from the beginning. In 2 Corinthians, Paul explicitly says that it’s fine to pay ministers. But then he kind of undercuts that by adding, “But I thank God *I’ve* never received a salary.” Whatever, Paul. The point is: except in times when the church has been outlawed, having professional clergy has always been one of the options. But here in America since the church boom of the 1950s it has become the *default* option. And that made sense in the 50s when churches were all growing. Once a church gets up toward 100 people, it’s hard for volunteers to keep things going. But, as some of you may have noticed, we are no longer in the 1950s. Mid-sized churches, like us, have gone the way of the middle class. There are fewer and fewer of us. What we have now are a few mega-churches with thousands of members, and a whole lot of small churches. 70% of American churches have 100 or fewer members, and half of those have 50 or fewer. Our default model of full-time, well-paid, professional clergy is no longer appropriate. We have gotten comfortable with a clergy-led, lay-supported model of church; and we need to move to a lay-led, clergy-supported model.

Which would be better anyway, because the purpose of the church is to make disciples, and people become disciples by doing ministry, not by paying someone else to do it. Going back to Moses and Joshua, Joshua was getting all huffy because these two people were prophesying without Moses’ permission, and in his view Moses was the leader. Everything needed to run through Moses. But in Moses’ view, God was the leader, and God does what God wants to do. This summer you have had a chance to witness the depth of commitment and giftedness that is found in our congregation. One of the things I have realized is that I need to be more intentional about encouraging your leadership – or at least not getting in your way.

The second scripture, from the Gospel of Mark, is similar to the one from Numbers, but with a slightly different focus. Jesus’ disciple John sees someone preaching and serving others in Jesus’ name, but that person is *not a part of their group!* Like Joshua, he’s aghast. “Make him stop, Master!” And, like Moses, Jesus replies, “Get a grip! It’s not a competition! We aren’t trying to build a kingdom for ourselves. We aren’t trying to capture market-share. We’re here to proclaim the kingdom of God, and if he’s doing that in my name ... cool!”

One of the things I did during my sabbatical was visit other churches. If I wasn't on the road, I went to some church that was different from ours. No Methodist churches. I went to a Pentecostal church, several country churches, Missouri Synod Lutheran, non-denominational ultra-conservative. Lots of variety. I'll talk more about some of those experiences in other sermons or articles, but a couple of comments today. First, the two churches where I felt most welcomed and where the service was the most worshipful to me were churches that were led by lay people. No one in those churches expected someone else to do the welcoming, and no one in those churches was there for a performance.

And second, in *every* church, I found people who were there seeking Christ, working to grow in faith. In every church, there were people that I felt were fellow-travelers. In that ultra-conservative church that I mentioned – a church that, just last summer, hosted an event that featured Representative Marjory Taylor Green – I heard one of the best sermons on discipleship that I have ever heard.

We have, within the lifetime of most of us here, entered a new world for the church, a world we're still sorting out, but two things I'm confident of. First, in this new world, the old division between clergy and laity is going to become less significant. People like me must decrease; people like you must increase. And second, the old barriers between rival churches are going to need to be lowered. The old denominational divisions have been growing more irrelevant for decades, but we need to reach across the new division as well: mainline vs. evangelical. When we reach the point where our common faith in Christ is more important than our very different political opinions, all our churches will be stronger.

Those are some of the things I learned this summer.