
Purity Insistence and Empire Arrogance: All or Nothing?

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler

Proper 21 – Year B

John 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.” But Jesus said, “Do not stop him;... whoever is not against us is for us. Mark 9:38–40

Whoever is not against us is for us!

This morning, and this past week, I am reminded of one of the great stories of our Bible, from the Book of Numbers—a powerful story, which has much to teach us about leadership in any generation. In short, it is a story about Moses, and two of his more obscure followers, Eldad and Medad.

At Numbers, chapter 11, the story occurs in the desert of Sinai, after Moses has led the Hebrews to freedom from the oppression of the ancient Egyptians. It is an unfortunate feature of life, in any generation, that the newly freed people soon begin to complain about their leader.

“Why have you brought us out to the desert?” they complain. “We would rather be back where the food was delicious. We remember the fish and the melons and the onions and garlic and leeks of Egypt!” Yes, the Hebrews, in their anxiety and distress, are so upset that they are longing to return to the conditions of slavery. Such is the human condition!

Moses, in turn, great leader that he was, turns to deliver the same sort of complaint to his Lord! Moses asks God, “Why have you treated me so badly? Why have you laid the burden of all these weeping people on me?” “I am not able to carry the burden of this people alone,” Moses says. He is exasperated.

So, according to the story, Yahweh commands Moses to specify seventy people, seventy elders, and take them to the Tent of Meeting. There, Yahweh will take some of the spirit that Moses has and place it upon the heads of the seventy elders. Thus, the leadership assigned to Moses will be distributed and delegated. Moses’ burden will be mitigated, and the people will actually be cared for in a better way, with distributed leadership. It’s a great story about distributed authority, again a story with much to teach us in our own time, and in any time. Authority that rests in only one individual, even if that person is wonderful, is not as effective and healthy as distributed authority!

But something crazy happens! When these newly ordained seventy elders have received the spirit and they are prophesying healthily, why, they hear about two other people. Apparently, Eldad and Medad, way outside the tent, are not with the seventy properly ordained elders; and, yet, some of the spirit has come upon them, too, and they are prophesying! Joshua comes running up to Moses and says, “Moses! Stop them! They are not with us!”

Moses, in his expansive wisdom, recognizes immediately what has occurred. “Are you jealous for my sake?” he asks, “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!” That is, the Lord’s spirit is larger than any one set of people, or any one system, or any one authority. There is enough of the Lord’s spirit to rest upon all of God’s people, not just those properly delegated and ordained, not just upon the chosen few, not just upon the ideologically pure.

Ideological purity. In many of our strongest institutions today, there exists a self-destructive illness which has been inside humanity for our entire existence. I call it an illness, but it is really a psychological predilection marked by twin viruses: the virus of purity insistence, and the virus of empire arrogance. In politics, in church, in society, purity insistence and empire arrogance clamor for “all or nothing” strategies: “my way or the highway,” they say. “If you are not exactly for me and like me, then I am against you.”

There is a startling similarity between purity insistence and empire arrogance. The church is at its worst when it is tempted towards empire, when it wants to anoint emperors instead of servants, when its leaders think leadership is simply making sweeping and absolutist pronouncements. Even when those pronouncements seem good, and even when we might agree with them, if the nature of those pronouncements is imperial, then a dangerous disease is imminent.

The church is also at its worst when it insists on purity, when it demands that every member follow every jot and tittle of whatever the contemporary standard of law is. And remember: every party, every religious system, contains some sort of law. Democrats have their liberal markers, and Republicans have their conservative ones. So do churches. We have little markers, indicators, litmus tests, of whether someone is with us or against us. Those litmus tests are our purity indicators.

Purity indicators in our time might be such issues as abortion, same-sex marriage, for sure. But they are also such issues as opposition to the death penalty and gun control laws. Our temptation is to simply destroy those who are against us.

Whatever your politics, you had to admire the rather sacrificial act of Congressman John Boehner this past week, who found himself running afoul of the purity insisters. In resigning his office, he simply refused to play the game of fruitless polarization.

John Boehner admitted enormous pride and consolation from his association with Pope Francis. The Roman Catholic pope, of course, might be the one leader in this world who would be most prone to purity insistence and empire pride. Christian churches, of whatever denomination, are continually tempted to those illnesses; and the Roman Catholic Church can sure seem like an empire, a power accustomed to demanding and receiving its own way.

But Francis, of course, has brought a different attitude to his leadership, one that is worth emulating, truly trying to mirror the leadership of Christ. In Washington this past week, Pope Francis told his fellow bishops that *“the path ahead, then, is dialogue among yourselves, dialogue in your presbyterates, dialogue with lay persons, dialogue with families, dialogue with society. ...Harsh and divisive language does not befit the tongue of a pastor, it has no place in his heart; although it may momentarily seem to win the day, only the enduring allure of goodness and love remains truly convincing.”* (Pope Francis to other bishops at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle, Washington, DC, September 23, 2015)

And to the United States Congress, Pope Francis urged our country to avoid polarization. He said that *“there is another temptation which we must especially guard against: the simplistic reductionism which sees only good or evil; or, if you will, the righteous and sinners. The contemporary world, with its open wounds which affect so many of our brothers and sisters, demands that we confront every form of polarization which would divide it into these two camps.”* (Pope Francis addresses the United States Congress on Thursday, September 24, 2015)

So, this week, I have been reminded that the way of Jesus is not the way of “All or Nothing.” Great governments include strong voices who honor and respect those across the aisle. Great churches recognize that the Spirit of God is larger than any one party or doctrine. While seventy leaders are being ordained in the main tent, let Eldad and Medad prophesy enthusiastically in another place. Our energy and good will need not be diminished because someone else, not with us, is doing something equally good.

The way of Jesus lets other disciples, not only his own, also cast out demons and heal the sick. You don’t have to agree with my politics for me to appreciate the good that you are doing in the world. You don’t have to be a member of my church, or of my religion, or of my group of disciples, for the Spirit of God to be at work in you.

AMEN.

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