



The chapter heading is “Greed and Prophecy”.¹ The title of his talk is “Faith and Possessions.”² Both Ellen Davis and Luke Timothy Johnson are concerned with how we use possessions, how we organize our life, and how we are in community and in relationship with God.

In Chapter 11 of the book of Numbers, Moses once again is dealing with the complaints and bitterness of the people who insist on looking back towards Egypt rather than setting their sights on the future. They

seem to think that their life in Egypt was a golden age even as we know they were slaves. Now in the wilderness, the people have manna but they want more. They want meat. God gets angry and gives them so much quail that it is coming out of the nostrils.

Moses in frustration cries out to God that he cannot carry all the people alone. The burden is too much for him. God responds by ordering Moses to find 70 of the elders and officers. Those 70 then will gather with Moses in the tent of meeting and God will come down and talk with them there. Some of the spirit of leadership will be granted to the 70 so that they shall share in the leadership and organization of the people.

God reminds Moses that God’s power is not limited and that God’s word can be trusted. God’s spirit comes to rest on the 70 and they prophesy. And, as usual, just when you thought things were settling down, God does a new thing. Two men- Eldad and Medad- who remained in the camp and so were not at the tent of meeting- they, too, began to prophesy.

And, as you also know, we humans are quick to protest when our specialness isn’t so special. Because Eldad and Medad were not part of the 70, complaints were made against them. Moses’ response is one that we can also predict: “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit on them.”

Our Average Sunday Attendance or ASA is 71. Hmmm... Moses was told by God to gather 70 and God’s spirit came to rest on them and they prophesied. Moses had it right: Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit on them.

Why aren’t each of us prophets clearly showing in our daily life how the spirit of God rests on us? The answer may lie, in part, in the title of Ellen Davis’s chapter “Greed and Prophecy” or in the title of Luke Timothy Johnson’s speech “Faith and Possessions.”

¹ Ellen F. Davis. Getting Involved with God (Chicago: Cowley Publications, 2001), 202-208.

² Dr. Luke Timothy Johnson at The Episcopal Network for Stewardship, June 7, 2014.

Numbers 11:24-30; Psalm 104: 25-35, 37; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 7:37-39

God's abundance and gifts to us are not limited to receiving the Holy Spirit and thereafter being able to prophesy to the love and faithfulness of God. The psalm reminds us that God has made all things and that God orders the world and all the creatures. God sends forth the Spirit and everything is created and renewed. Our response is to sing and praise the Lord. We are to bless the Lord, O my soul. Hallelujah!

When we get too connected to our possessions, we lose the ability to see God's love and creation all around us. Our possessions become our idols. We become inward focused. We become a burden to ourselves and others. Alternatively, when we understand that God's love for us is never-ending, our hearts fill with the Holy Spirit and we become prophets and glorify God. "Greed stems from lack of faith. We crave more than we need because we do not look to God to fill our emptiness... Greed [jealousy, covetousness or whatever word you want to use for being unsatisfied with what we have arises because possessions do] not satisfy us... we are trying to fill ourselves with what is not God."³

The Israelites already had enough. They had the manna that God provided each day. The instruction to gather only enough for that day was clear. They needed to trust God that more manna would come the next day- and yet by and large we humans have trouble believing- trusting- in God. We fear that the manna will not be there tomorrow and so we are greedy and seek two days' worth of manna. What we find on the second morning is that the manna has gone bad and is not fit to eat. God's word is to be trusted. Gather enough for this day and trust God that there will be enough for tomorrow.

Now, the Israelites don't simply wait for the manna to show up on their tent front step, so to speak. They have to go out and gather the manna. But it is there- human labor is rewarded.

So what goes wrong that now the people are complaining about manna? I'm bored with the taste. I'm mad that I have to go out and pick up the manna. Moses, you fix it or better yet, take us back to Egypt where we were taken care of. Manna, a gift from God that was intended perhaps to help Israel learn what was sufficient- what was enough- seems to have failed. We are too often greedy and want more than we really need- more than is sufficient for our needs- for any number of reasons but at least partly because we don't trust God.

The story doesn't end with the quail coming out of the people's nostrils, though. The story continues with the calling of the 70 and later the reminder that we are not always in control, even in leadership positions.

We don't know what the prophesy was that the 70 uttered. Maybe it doesn't matter as long as the prophesy was at least in part to call the people back to right relationship with God. Troubling is the indication that once the 70 had prophesied they did so no more. We don't know why the Spirit of prophesy did not linger but it did not. A guess might include that the 70 became enamored of their own power and status and thus they themselves failed to live into

³ Davis, 203-204.

Numbers 11:24-30; Psalm 104: 25-35, 37; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 7:37-39

the gift of the Spirit for longer than that one time: they fell into the same sin as those they were sent to lead – wanting more than was necessary or even helpful to live a life turned to and trusting upon God. Perhaps they came to believe that their gift of prophecy was their doing and not God's gift through the Spirit.

Eldad and Medad then began to prophesy. Again, we don't know what they prophesied, only that they did. Their mission field was the camp and not the tent. Surely there is enough opportunity for each of God's people to prophesy to the goodness of God. We don't need to be jealous of someone else being granted a gift from God.

Paul, writing to the Corinthians reminds us that we each are given gifts through the Holy Spirit. No one gift is more important than the other. Each is necessary to build up the body of Christ. Each gift is given so that the community may be made stronger and more faithful to God, not for the holding up of any individual. By embracing our gifts in the collective- the gifts of each of us- we can build stronger faith-filled communities to love and serve the Lord. Elevating the status of one because of their gift defeats the purpose and leads to idolatry and death. We have seen time after time celebrity's crash and burn because their giftedness becomes sin: something that they think they have created rather than understanding their giftedness is given by God for the benefit of the wider community.

Perhaps you know someone who has lost a job and has lost their sense of self and sense of place in the world as a result. That person has tied too much of their self-image and self-worth to the gift given to them by God that was reflected in their job. Or perhaps you have known someone who retired and thereafter seemed to drift aimlessly because "I don't know who I am apart from my job as [fill in the blank]". The gifts did not go away because the job went away or because they retired. God still can use those gifts in different ways in we will keep our eyes open for opportunities to serve the Lord.

We do not have to worry about the pie being too small for all of us to be filled up with God's goodness. God's gifts are not a zero-sum game where if I am given a gift there is less for you. Dave Bland reads Joshua's complaint to Moses to stop Eldad and Medad from prophesying as jealousy and fear that their gifts lessened his. He believes that "Joshua's perspective often limits the ministry of the church. Such jealousy is often displayed in possessiveness: 'This is my turf, my ministry, my contact and no one else has a right to intervene.'"⁴

Blane suggests that the gift of the spirit is more like wisdom: sharing wisdom does not diminish wisdom but rather expands it. Another image is that of one candle lighting another until the whole room is lit. Lighting the second candle from the first expands the light- it does not diminish it. All in the room can see when all the candles are lit.

When we work together we have the opportunity to improve our community more than when we work alone. Sometimes it is the working together that has the greater impact than the particular task we undertake. We build relationships when we work together. We learn and

⁴ Dave Bland in Feasting on the Word, Year A, vol. 3 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 5.

Numbers 11:24-30; Psalm 104: 25-35, 37; 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13; John 7:37-39

grow and become more of who God is calling us to be- the body of Christ sent into the world to love and serve in all ways and in all times.

The next time you are jealous or resentful of someone else, the next time someone seems to be getting the limelight unfairly, ask yourself why you are objecting. Do you have a “zero-sum” mindset where you are concerned that someone is getting what you deserve and by their being honored you are feeling less worthy or less loved? Would your life be different if you could see their being held up as a gift from God that enhances the whole community?

It is not always easy to trust that God’s gifts to us and love for us is endless and we need not fear that just because someone else has what we want that it means God loves us less. The Lord’s power is not limited. Focus on how your gifts can be used to create a better and more loving community. God has sent forth the Spirit and we have been created. We are to renew the face of the earth in response to the love of God. **Amen.**