

May 13, 2018

A Congregation like Me

Numbers 12:1-9

One part of God's protection for the Children of Israel in the wilderness was guidance and direction. We read about God's guidance in Numbers 12:1-9:

12 While they were at Hazeroth, Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Cushite woman whom he had married (for he had indeed married a Cushite woman); ²and they said, 'Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?' And the Lord heard it. ³Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth. ⁴Suddenly the Lord said to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, 'Come out, you three, to the tent of meeting.' So the three of them came out. ⁵Then the Lord came down in a pillar of cloud, and stood at the entrance of the tent, and called Aaron and Miriam; and they both came forward. ⁶And he said, 'Hear my words:

When there are prophets among you,

I the Lord make myself known to them in visions;

I speak to them in dreams.

⁷ Not so with my servant Moses;

he is entrusted with all my house.

⁸ With him I speak face to face—clearly, not in riddles;

and he beholds the form of the Lord.

Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?' ⁹And the anger of the Lord was kindled against them, and he departed.

I'm going to bet that this is a story you haven't heard before. You may not have known that at some point during the wilderness wanderings, Moses took a second wife – from Cush. Cush is the Biblical name for the land at the headwaters of the Nile, what we call today Ethiopia. We never learn this Ethiopian woman's name, and she is never mentioned again, but we do know, from today's scripture, that her presence distressed Moses' sister Miriam and brother Aaron. In fact, it bothered them so much that they attempted a sort of palace coup, trying to oust Moses as the spiritual leader of Israel and step into his position. After all, they said, "God has spoken through us, too." That's sort of true. Aaron had been chosen high priest for Israel by God, and Miriam is also called a prophet. So, in disgust with Moses' Ethiopian wife, they try to persuade Israel that they no longer need Moses. God, however, rebukes them directly and says that, in fact, they *do* need Moses, because there has never been a prophet like Moses to whom God has spoken so directly. So be quiet, Aaron and Miriam.

The text never says exactly why this Ethiopian woman got the two so worked up. It could be because she's a foreigner, but Moses' first wife was a Midianite, and you never hear any complaints about her. You can't help suspecting that it wasn't just that she was a foreigner but rather that she was one of *those* foreigners – you know, the ones with darker skin. In the rest of the Hebrew Bible, that's generally the only thing pointed out about Ethiopians: that they have

dark skin, so it seems most likely that Miriam and Aaron are expressing suspicion and distrust of someone from a different race because of her skin color. It happens sometimes.

But we know it happens. We're Americans, and a significant part of our history revolves around that suspicion of people with variant skin colors. Today we call it racism. Now don't misunderstand me. I'm not trying to run down America. This is a great nation, founded on noble principles, which have become even more noble as we have grown into them. For instance, we were founded partly on the principle of equality. Now, to the founders themselves, that meant "equality of straight white male property-owners," but as our nation has matured we have slowly and painfully come to recognize that the principle is bigger than our founders understood. So, again, this is a great nation. But if we are going to honor our noble principles, we have to be honest about all the times along the way that we have not lived up to our own ideals. For instance, for much of our history we have demonized and tried to destroy those who were in this land before us, the Native Americans. And, no, we can't just say that was wrong but it's all in the past now. As long as Native Americans live with the effects of past racism, then racism isn't really past. The same is true of our vile sin of African slavery – which, despite the learned pronouncement of a famous musician, was not actually voluntary. We managed to put an end to slavery as such by means of a horrible Civil War, and we managed to stamp many racist laws in the Civil Rights Movement, but no, we aren't done yet. As long as it has to be specified that the life of a Black person is as precious as that of a white person – and it *does*, apparently, still need to be stated – then we have more work to do.

That work is happening. We are engaged now in a new Civil Rights movement, one that will be slower and in many ways harder than that of 50 years ago, because it seeks to change not just unjust laws but unjust attitudes. I still believe in our nation and believe that ultimately it will stumble forward rather than backward, but no social change happens without fierce resistance, and things may get worse before they get better.

Anyway, back to Moses. It's worth noting that the racism of Miriam and Aaron wasn't expressed at a national level: "This is a *Hebrew* nation!" There was no Hebrew nation yet. Their racism was expressed in the context of the religious community. When they criticized Moses for his African wife, they attacked his *religious* authority – as if consorting with *those* people was a violation of their faith. "We're prophets, too, just like Moses! But unlike Moses, we associate only with our own kind."

You probably know about that, too. There is indeed something in institutional faith that gravitates toward homogeneity – toward associating only with people like ourselves. Martin Luther King, Jr., famously pointed out that 11:00 Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in America. That was 50 years ago, and society has changed a lot since then. Sunday morning, not so much. The American Church remains largely segregated. In fact, since the middle of last century, we've even had a justification for segregating ourselves. Around mid-century, a missionary scholar named Donald McGavran inaugurated what came to be known as the Church Growth Movement. One of the basic principles of church growth, McGavran said, was homogeneity. That is, on the mission field you start separate churches for each people group, rather than putting people from different groups together. People want to feel comfortable in

church, he said, and being surrounded by people from different tribes or cultures made them uncomfortable and kept the church from growing numerically.

As I said, McGavran wrote about international missions, but in the early 80s his principles were picked up by church planters here in the US. All those suburban megachurches that began showing up around then were founded on McGavran's principles, seeking out new, growing suburbs where people of about the same age, background, and socio-economic level were buying homes, then designing the church entirely around that demographic's preferences. The Saddleback Valley Community Church, started by Rick Warren even provided a helpful illustr Saddleback Sam represents the target demographic of that new church: dorks, apparently. No, this was the 80s: we were all dorks. But it's pretty clear what Warren was planting: a church for young, well-educated professionals, with high-tech toys and disposable income. Not stated, but loudly implied, is "white male." I have seen an updated picture that included Saddleback Sally, so women did get included later. Sally was white, too.

"SADDLEBACK SAM" - OUR TARGET
THE LIKELY MR. SOUTH ORANGE COUNTY



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And it worked. McGavran and Warren were apparently right. If you want a big church, measured numerically, you need to find a place where there are a lot of people that are just alike, and start a church tailored for precisely that group. People will come and immediately feel at home because everyone else there is *just like them*. Neither Warren nor his thousands of imitators over the next thirty years had any intention of being racist. They just wanted to start really large, really successful churches. But the thing about racism is that very few people do it intentionally, but a lot of us manage to do it anyway. These were churches founded by and for white yuppies, just as this church over a century ago, was founded by white people for white people. I'm sure it never occurred to anyone to do otherwise. As I said before, without or without Church Growth

theory to back us up, churches tend to self-segregate into groups of people that are enough alike to be comfortable.

But look again at God's response to Miriam's and Aaron's rebellion against Moses. God completely ignores the racial basis of their revolt, not even granting it the dignity of a response. Instead, God makes it crystal clear that Moses is a prophet like no other, regardless of his racial connections. What God cares about is Moses' openness to God's Spirit, and as long as that remains steady, Moses can be or marry any color of the rainbow he wants.

Maybe it would be good if the church sounded less like Miriam and Aaron and more like God, indifferent to race and focused entirely on the voice of the Spirit. Maybe it's time for us to stop focusing exclusively on what works to bring people in and focus as well on how to represent our radically loving God to those who show up. Maybe it's time for us to stop trying to be comfortable in this faith that was never designed to make us comfortable but rather to stretch us into the serious discomfort of imitating Christ. It is time for us to no longer be like everyone else at church, but rather to learn how to experience the image of God in people who are different from us.

You know, the early Methodists had a chance to start out right. One of our earliest preachers was former slave Richard Allen, who traveled with Francis Asbury – not as assistant but as partner. He was affirmed as a preacher along with the white preachers at the 1784 “Christmas Conference” that began the Methodist Church. But very soon, we Methodists were faced with a choice: if we stayed on the path of racial equality, we would lose the Methodist churches of the slave-owning south. We had to choose whether to be just or big. We chose poorly.

It is time for us to demonstrate to our nation what it looks like when an institution lives up to its ideals. Our ideal – as expressed by Paul in Galatians – is that there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, but all are one in Christ. Those were the divisions that faced the early church, but today we might rewrite it around our own divisions and say that there is no longer male or female, black or white, straight or gay, immigrant or native, alien or American, poor or wealthy, but all are one in Christ Jesus. Indeed, as a congregation, we have recently adopted an inclusion statement saying that. Now we just have to live up to it. It is time for the church – local and national – to live out that ideal, even if it means sacrificing the ideal of being big and wealthy. It is time that we as a church lead the way for our fractured society.