

Who are Eldad and Medad?

Numbers 11:24-30

Acts 2:1-21

Heather Prince Doss
Sea Island Presbyterian Church
12 June 2011 – Pentecost

Happy Birthday, Church! Did you know that today is a day that many Christians think of as the birthday of the church? It is Pentecost, the day when the Holy Spirit came and the church of Jesus Christ began.

Remember today as the birthday of the church, I open with a question: have you, or maybe your children, ever *not* been invited to a birthday party? Growing up, I was one of those pitiful kids on the fringes. Other kids were generally nice to me, but I never was really “in” with the prettiest, most popular girls in elementary school. I only occasionally received invitations to their birthday parties. And even then, I sensed that I was among the obligatory invitations – the kids your mom made you invite. Now, I think I grew into a pretty well-adjusted adult, so I do not feel too sorry for myself. But I do remember what it feels like to not get invited, to be left out. It is a low and ugly feeling.

On Pentecost, as we celebrate the birthday of the church – the day when the Holy Spirit came and rested upon not only Jesus’ followers but many other people, too, we remember that at first birthday party, there were some who felt left out. They sneered at the new believers and mocked their Spirit-filled ecstasy: “They must be drunk!” Likewise, the story from Numbers illustrates the responses of those who were “in” and those who were supposed to be “out” when the Spirit of the Lord visited the Israelite camp.

The story from Numbers is not a very familiar one, but some of the characters are certainly big names when it comes to God’s story, most notably Joshua and Moses. The other characters are minor players in the big picture of the Bible. You have probably never even heard of Eldad and Medad, right?

One day, after the Israelites had complained to Moses about having to eat manna for so long – they wanted some meat in their diet – Moses cries out to the Lord in frustration and despair. The Lord tells Moses that he will give the Israelites so much meat that they will eat themselves sick. Then the Lord tells Moses to gather seventy of the elders of Israel and take them to the Tent of Meeting, just outside the camp, where the Lord will talk to Moses. The very next day, just as the Lord instructed, Moses, Joshua, and the seventy elders go out to the Tent of Meeting. And just as the Lord promised, he speaks to Moses and even sends his spirit upon the seventy so that they prophesied. Seems like a pretty important party.

Interestingly, though, there were two elders who were left out. For whatever reason, these two – Eldad and Medad – were not selected when Moses chose the seventy to go with him to the Tent

of Meeting. The Scripture tells us that the spirit of the Lord rested on these two men, even though they had not been invited to the tent; and Eldad and Medad prophesied in the camp.

Their prophecy must have been a pretty remarkable event in the Israelite camp because an unnamed young man runs to the Tent to tell Moses what has happened. It is not Moses who responds, though. Joshua, Moses' assistant, speaks first: "My lord Moses, stop them!" These men were not invited to the party. There are good and orderly ways to do things, and this is not the way! What right do they have to prophesy? Put them back in their place!

It is an inclination we have all had before. It is an inclination I get a lot when I am in charge of something; to some extent, at least, I would call it a weakness. I have a plan and an expectation for how things should happen. And when someone is not performing the way I expect, I take control and do it myself. And if for some reason I cannot get things to work out the way that I want, I become upset or anxious or teary or frustrated. Despite my childhood despair over being left out, I have probably done my share of excluding those who did not fit into my careful plans.

Maybe you are not a control freak like me. Maybe you just like rules – they are there for a reason, after all – and you get annoyed or angry or indignant or even self-righteous when other people do not follow those rules. Maybe you are even a little insecure and feel threatened by those who do things outside the box, things that could jeopardize the status quo.

I do not know exactly what Joshua was thinking or feeling when he spoke out against Eldad and Medad. I do know that, whatever the reason, he was uncomfortable with these two "outsiders" breaking rank and acting like insiders. Maybe he was even a little uncomfortable with a Lord who would take outsiders and give them the same Spirit that he gave to the insiders.

Thankfully, Joshua is not the end of the story any more than our tendencies to control, enforce rules, and protect the status-quo are the end of the story. When Joshua calls for Moses to stop these two men from prophesying, Moses rebukes and corrects his assistant: "Are you jealous for my sake? If only all of the Lord's people were prophets and the Lord would put his spirit on all of them!" To those of us who have known or witnessed the pain of being outsiders, Moses' words offer comfort and hope. To those of us who have either knowingly or unknowingly excluded others, Moses' words challenge us and call us to repentance.

In January 2010 this congregation experienced the loss of one of our members, John Kendall, after a difficult battle with cancer. John and his wife Sharron have been active members of Sea Island, but they have also been active members of the communities in which they lived: first Port Royal, and then Dataw Island. John and Sharron especially felt loved and welcomed and included by the community that formed at the Old Towne Coffee Haus in Port Royal. They spent many mornings there each week and became close friends with the staff and other regular customers. When John passed, Sharron elected to have his memorial service not at Sea Island Presbyterian Church but at the Old Towne Coffee Haus.

Now I am sure there were some who looked twice when they read the announcement in the paper. Some may have thought Sharron's decision irreverent. Certainly when Pastor Steve met with Sharron to organize the service, he could have told her that memorial services should

happen at church or the cemetery or some other “appropriate” or usual space. What Sharron had already experienced and what Pastor Steve upheld was that sometimes the Spirit moves and works in unexpected and “inappropriate” places. If Steve and Karen and the Coffee Haus customers shared something of God’s spirit with the Kendall family, then who are we to lift up our voices and cry, “Stop them!”

If only all of the Lord’s people were prophets and the Lord would put his spirit on all of them!

The truth of Pentecost is that God’s Spirit cannot be limited. Not by race, creed, or language. Not by position or status. Not by our self-righteous attempts to control and direct it. Like the wind, God’s Spirit blows where it will. As the church, we are like the seventy, the “already in” crowd. The Spirit of the Lord rests on us and speaks through us in remarkable and powerful ways. Pentecost is our birthday party. But all around us are Eldads and Medads, other people and places on which the Lord’s spirit rests and through whom God is speaking. They may be baristas or coffee shop regulars. They may be disabled, divorced, agnostic, alcoholic, poor, illegal, imprisoned. They could be anybody.

We are the seventy, the “in” crowd. And the question that awaits us this day is will we rejoice over these outsiders who are acting like insiders and invite them to join the party, or will we be like Joshua, crying out “Stop them!”

And let me add that there are no obligatory invitations to the Pentecost party. We cannot invite those other people, whoever they might be, to the party but then tell them they have to sit over there where they will not disturb any of the other guests. We cannot give them the smallest piece of cake or refuse to sit by them or laugh when they do not know how to play pin the tail on the donkey. It is not really our party, anyway. It is the Lord who sends the Holy Spirit and who invites his children to come, the same Lord who welcomes home the wayward son (Luke 15:11-32) and goes out into the street to bring the poor and lame to his feast (Luke 14:16-24).

The truth of Pentecost is the God’s Spirit is at work in the seventy, and it is at work in the two. God’s Spirit is working here, and it is working out there. Go into the world this week – to your jobs, your neighborhoods, your coffee shops – and look for it. Look for the Eldads and the Medads, the unlikely people who are filled with the Spirit of the Lord. Rejoice over them and invite them in to celebrate with us the wonderful, uncontrollable, and abundant gifts of God.