

“Eldad and Medad Aren’t So Bad”

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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.
(Numbers 11: 24-30)

In our society, a velvet rope sends a specific set of signals. First of all, it is a directional aid. The rope is there to tell us where to walk or where to stand. It helps us navigate the line and wait our turn. It is like a fence, but softer, gentler, and more subtle.

A velvet rope is also a symbol of status and exclusivity. Velvet ropes have hooks and come in sections so the barrier they create can be subtly opened and closed. Individuals who are on the list can be welcomed inside, while others remain cordoned off and kept at a distance. Velvet ropes pair nicely with red carpets in this regard, designating areas where only the most important people can go. They help to divide the insiders from the outsiders.

In both of these ways, this story from the book of Numbers is a velvet rope kind of story. As the Israelites push farther north through the wilderness, they are getting crankier and crankier about the difficulties of life on the road. Their gripes are legitimate – they do not have enough water, they do not have enough food. And even though God keeps providing what they need, Moses is getting overwhelmed by the constant logistical demands of a large traveling band of people. “I cannot carry all these people by myself,” Moses says to God. “The burden is too heavy for me.”¹

So God tells Moses to gather seventy of Israel’s elders, people who have proven their ability to lead. “Bring them to the tent of meeting,” God says, “and I will bless them with the power of the Spirit so you don’t have to carry this burden alone.” These seventy would help Moses tend the velvet ropes of their society. They would be directional aides, helping guide the people in the way they should go. But they also created a group of insiders – people elevated above the normal crowd. Being chosen to be one of the chosen seventy was a mark of status. It was membership in a new and exclusive club.

Eldad and Medad were chosen to be in this club. They received the coveted invitation to the spiritual gala that was happening up in the tent of meeting. But for some reason, Eldad and Medad didn’t go. Sixty-eight of the elders willingly – I expect joyfully -- passed through the velvet ropes and went up for their blessing by the Lord. But Eldad and Medad stayed

¹ Numbers 11:14.



back in the camp. The interesting thing is that, even though they didn't follow the same path as the other 68, God still blessed them just like all the others. The Spirit rested on them, too. And they ministered to the people in the camp, just like the others. They shared God's word and God's blessing to the community.

The other members of the club, however, did not like it one bit. They went to Moses to complain. Joshua, Moses' right-hand man, went so far as to demand that Moses take action – that he forbid Eldad and Medad from prophesying in the name of the Lord. Moses refused to do it. As he saw it, Eldad and Medad weren't so bad. They were doing God's work. They were helping people see what was good, what was right. It probably stung Joshua a bit that Moses wished there were more leaders like Eldad and Medad. *"Would that all the Lord's people were prophets" like them, he said.*

Interestingly, the passage does not tell us why these two men did not go up to the tent like everyone else. Some theories have been proposed to solve the riddle. In Jewish tradition, "midrash" is rabbinic teaching that seeks to interpret sacred texts by proposing additional details to explain gaps or confusing aspects in the stories. One such proposal offered by Rabbi Simeon, an influential teacher from the 2nd century. *"Eldad and Meidad chose to remain in the camp,"* Rabbi Simeon explained, *"for when the Holy One ordered Moses, 'Gather unto Me seventy of the elders of Israel,' Eldad and Medad said to themselves, 'We are not worthy of such distinction.'*

This, Rabbi Simeon said, is what made them special. Eldad and Medad were not just looking out for themselves. Humbled by their selection, they responded with humility. Service to them was not about a velvet rope, or about access to power. It was about the needs of God's people. God blessed them because they knew this new job they had been given was never about the exclusivity of getting into the tent. It was about using their talents to serve God and care for others in God's name. And that is why God not only blessed them, but blessed them even more than the others. In the end, Rabbi Simeon said, God gave them an extra blessing and distinction. The other 68 elders worked and prophesied for a while, but Eldad and Medad kept on going longer than anyone else.

The same dynamic was at work in the 9th chapter of Mark's gospel. There too, some outsiders were doing work in the name of Christ. And there too, those who had been invited into the inner circle didn't like anyone else stealing their thunder. One of the disciples came to Jesus and said, *"Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."*

"Do not stop him," Jesus said. *"For no one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward."*²

Whoever is not against us is for us. It seems too simple, too permissive. But something we tend to forget is that Jesus was never interested in velvet ropes or special tents. He did not work in the currency of status or exclusivity. Anyone could be in his club, anyone was welcome in his tent, as long as they had the right heart, the right purpose, the right spirit of humility and love. Whoever that person was, Jesus saw that he was helping people who needed help. He was healing hurts that needed to be healed. He was bearing witness to things that are good in the world. In the same way that Moses saw good things coming from

² Mark 9:38-41.

the faithful work of Eldad and Medad, Jesus saw good work coming from this unnamed partner in ministry. And he refused to stop that good work from continuing.

Interestingly, though Jesus clearly taught that *“whoever is not against us is for us,”* he also preached the inverse. In Matthew 12:30, Jesus says *“Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.”* Jesus spoke these words in a moment when powerful men were criticizing him for healing a man who was blind and mute on the sabbath day. Moved by compassion, Jesus had given the man the ability to both talk and see. But the leaders were more interested in protecting their power than helping those in need. So they latched onto a technicality to discredit Jesus and push him aside. That is when Jesus made it clear that not everything that is done in the name of religion honors God... that there are times when someone might be claiming to work in God’s name, when what they are actually doing is harmful and sinful. Those people may claim to be with us, but they are not.

And how do we know the difference? I believe the method of determination is the same for each. Eldad and Medad were outsiders, but Moses saw that their work was helping people, so they were for God. The man who was healing in Jesus’ name wasn’t one of the twelve apostles, but he was helping people, so he was for God. But the men who wanted to keep Jesus out of their club, who wanted to hoard power even if it hurt people, Jesus knew they were not on his side. They were working against the healing Christ wanted to bring.

As Jesus himself taught, we have to look for the fruit. *“Watch out for false prophets,”* Christ said. *“They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit... Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.”*³

These are old words, but they have never been more relevant, and they have never been more important for people of faith. There are a lot of things being done right now in the name of God... there are a lot of things being said right now in the name of Christ... that have absolutely nothing to do with the grace of God or the love of Christ. And we cannot afford to be neutral on these things. It is not faithful to be blind to these things. We have to be discerning about who we are with and what we stand for.

It is a vital, central question right now, for all of us here. Who is with us? Who is against us? And its not about the words they say; it’s about what they are doing. It’s not about the velvet ropes that they want to defend; it’s about the kind of heart they have, the kind of purpose they serve, the kind of spirit they share with the world. It is not always easy to tell, but there are some guidelines we can follow:

- If actions or words do nothing but tear other people down, they are not for us.
- If actions or words seek to exclude other people just because their faith in God is a little different from ours, they are not for us.
- If actions or words shame or castigate groups of people on the basis of their race or gender or sexual identification, they are not for us.
- If actions or words are clearly selfish, self-serving, greedy, or manipulative, they are not for us.

But the inverse is also true.

³ Matthew 7:15-20.

- If someone is genuinely concerned about the welfare of others, they are not against us. They are for us.
- If someone is defending the weak, advocating for the marginalized, or trying to end the systematic oppression of God's people, wherever they may be, they are not against us. They are for us.
- If someone is binding up the broken-hearted, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, or looking out for the interests of the poor, they are not against us. They are for us.
- If someone is kind, caring, thoughtful, and generous of spirit, they are not against us. They are for us.

As people of God on this Pentecost Sunday, we are reminded that the life of faith is not about power or status or red carpets or exclusive clubs. The life of faith is a life that seeks the Spirit of God, that is animated by the Spirit of God, and that is not led by any other authority other than the Spirit of God. Scripture tells us exactly what the marks of such a life include, for "*the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.*"⁴ Such things can never be against us. Such things are always for us.

And we must be for them.

Amen.

⁴ Galatians 5:22-23.