

Sermon for Year B Proper 21
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St. Mary of the Hills, Blowing Rock, NC
The Reverend Jeanne Finan

Melt Down

Moses is having a melt down.
He has done his best and he is worn out.
Burnt out.
He has tried to lead these Israelites.
 He has led them away from the bondage of Egypt.
You might think the Israelites would be grateful.
But, no.
What does Moses get? What does he hear?
Complaining.
Whining.
Weeping.

And now Moses has had it
 And the only person he can sock it to is God.

Why have you treated me like this, God?
These people are not my responsibility.
I'm not their Daddy.
If one more person comes to me and tells me how I am not doing my job right
 or complaining to me that everything is all my fault....
 Give us meat to eat, Moses.
 Give us cucumbers and melons and ...
 They're even asking for onions, God?
 They know we don't eat onions in this camp!!
So don't you get angry with me, God!
I've had it!
I'm through.
If this is the way you treat me, just kill me now!

So Moses is having a melt down.
 I think many of us have been there before.
 Different reasons, different situations.
 Same basic melt down.

Now we might be a little more worried about Moses though.
After all, Moses is yelling at God.
Watch out Moses! This is the Old Testament.
God is likely to send a flood or a lightning bolt or at least make you go mute!

Not so.
God is listening.
God really hears what Moses is saying.
God hears a person who has tried, who has been faithful
and God hears a person who is honest.
God hears a person saying:
This job is just too big for me.
This task that is set before me—I can't handle it.

And I am so discouraged.
I have tried my best and I feel my worst.

So this God of mercy—
and yes, God is as merciful in the Old Testament as in the New—
God hears and God moves to help Moses.

What does God do?
In this story in the book of Numbers God gathers a council of people to help Moses,
to share the burden of leadership and guidance for the Israelites.
Seventy elders.
And God puts some of the spirit God had placed on Moses on these 70 others.

That is significant.
God takes some of the spirit God had placed on Moses...
God doesn't give everyone their own individual happy meal of Spirit—
God says, Moses, you need help with this burden,
and Moses, you need to share the Spirit as well.
Why did Moses think he had to do it all himself in the first place?

If Moses wants help,
Moses needs to share the leadership.
Moses needs to share the Spirit.
Moses needs to recognize he will have to reach out to and trust others.
Moses needs to learn that others can do this work, too.

And it sounds like a great solution.
God is saying, you know Moses, you're right.
This is too big a job for one person.
In fact, you've been doing the work of 71 people.
So I am going to divide this up—
I am going to offer you the diverse gifts of 70 other people.

It sounds like a perfect solution.
But, of course, in order for this to work
 Moses has to let go of his own need of being in control.
 That's often the real challenge
 for all of us.

Moses is up to the challenge
 because he has absolutely hit bottom.
Sometimes that is what it takes for us to ask for the help we need.
We hit bottom,
 completely burn out,
 spiral out of control,
 or just plain physically exhaust our bodies.

Suddenly, we are brutally whacked over the head:
 I can't do this by myself.
 I need help.

The need for help was there a long time before we melted down.
We were just too blind, too self centered, too afraid, too embarrassed, too busy to see it.

It was a shock to me my first week at seminary
 and the faculty and the administration said to us during orientation:
 If you don't learn to work with one another,
 you will never survive the next three years.
You won't make it.
There is too much to learn
 if you use your time and your energy competing with one another.
Find ways to work together.

Oh, there was some whining.
 We didn't really know one another.
 We were all so different—different backgrounds, different theologies,
 different ways of working and approaching problems,
 different priorities--
 but we listened and we heard.

Study groups were formed. Prayer groups were formed.
We opened our eyes and our hearts to how we might help one another.

Of course we were responsible for our own work—
 we had to write our own papers, we had to take our own exams.

But we studied together.
If you needed help with Hebrew or Greek,
another student who found languages a snap was there to tutor you.

When we knew there were going to be 300 identifications of biblical terms on an exam,
we didn't individually research all 300 terms.
We divided them up, thoroughly researched our 10
and then shared the information with one another.
We shared the burden. We trusted each other.

There were some people in my class who just could not do that.
There were those who believed that no one could do the work as well as they could
or that working as a team just took too long
or if everyone succeeds--well, what will that do to the grading curve?
Their whole life experience had been "my way or the highway" and
"taking care of number one." And they were always number one.

So no matter the burden,
they could not let go of their illusion of control.

They did not make it.
Sadly, to a person, I tell you,
they did not make it.
They could not ask for or receive help.
They chose to "die" on their own.
To which the faculty responded, *It's better for everyone.*
The last thing the Church needs is more Lone Ranger priests.

I say the last thing the Church needs is more Lone Rangers period.

If we cannot turn to one another for help,
it is almost impossible to turn to God for help.

I recently read an article that said the most often quoted verse in the Bible is this:
God helps those who help themselves.

The fact is,
that verse is not anywhere in the Bible.
It is a quote by Benjamin Franklin.

But it is a very handy stumbling block to toss in the path
of those we don't think work as hard as we do,
of those we think aren't as motivated as we are
or as efficient as we are.

What the Bible actually teaches
is that God helps the helpless.

God helps those who know they need help.
God helps those who fall flat on their faces
and say,
 Help me.
 I cannot do this alone.
 It is too big.
 I have lost my way.
 Help me.

How do we start learning to ask for help?

Start with prayer.
Start just where Moses started.
Start talking to God.
Rant and rail to God.
Fall on our knees.
Sit in silence and listen.
Stop being so busy all the time.
If we have pushed God outside the fenceline,
 we need to walk around and open the gate.

Whatever it is in our lives that seems too big to handle alone—
it probably is.

If we find ourselves constantly criticizing others—or demeaning ourselves--
 Cut it off. Cut it out.
 Stop it. Just plain stop it.
Stop speaking evil about others (and ourselves),
Pray for people. Pray for ourselves.

Tell God how overwhelmed and helpless,
 how frustrated and fed up and frightened we feel.
And keep doing that every day.

Tell God how blessed and grateful and immensely thankful we feel.
Keep doing that every day.

Pray what is really on our heart.

We can't skip over the step of talking to God.
If we do, we are likely to rant and rail at people who don't want to hear it—
 and aren't really listening anyway.

There's really only one constantly reliable listener.
Moses knew that.
Start there.

And when God sends help,
in the human form of those who come to share our burdens,
we need to reach out and take the hands that are offered.

As we heard in the letter of James this morning---

Submit yourselves to God.
Resist the devil and he will flee from you.
Draw near to God and God will draw near to you.

Start there.