

Wild Courage

Numbers 13: 26-28a, 31-33 & John 14: 27-31

Sermon by Mag Richer Smith

March 11, 2018

Numbers 13

26And they came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the Israelites in the wilderness of Paran, at Kadesh; they brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. 27And they told him, "We came to the land to which you sent us; it flows with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. 28Yet the people who live in the land are strong, and the towns are fortified and very large; and besides, we saw the descendants of Anak there.

31Then the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against this people, for they are stronger than we." 32So they brought to the Israelites an unfavorable report of the land that they had spied out, saying, "The land that we have gone through as spies is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people that we saw in it are of great size. 33There we saw the Nephilim (the Anakites come from the Nephilim); and to ourselves we seemed like grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them."

John 14

27Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

28You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I am coming to you.' If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. 29And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe. 30I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; 31but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way.

Today we are in the wilderness with the people who've been liberated!

With those who have been FREED ...

With those whom God has FED everyday for forty years,

With those who have been trusting the CLOUD of

Presence to be out ahead and lead into the PROMISE.

We are here with these who've stayed the course
through all the the wilderness struggles,
(not without *groaning & complaining*)
But with commitment to keep on following the
liberating God.

BUT NOW...well now the future looks dim...
And TRUST is turning to *JELLO!*...
The people God has shepherded
are immobilized by their fears!
THEIR spies have peered into the promise...
And report that:

*"Everyone we saw there was ENORMOUS in size.
Yes, and we saw GIANTS there.
We felt like Grasshoppers, and so we seemed to them."*

*(While I am aware that this passage is in the context of
dashed hopes for a military invasion and conquest of
the land, , I invite us today to step out of the context
and be with the METAPHOR we are offered in this text
And to imagine
THESE intimidating Giants of enormous size that cause
us to cower like puny grasshoppers!)*

The people who have been repeatedly SAVED by GOD
are *immobilized* NOW by gigantic odds...
by the Powers and Principalities that think they own this
world.
by the POWERS AND PRINCIPALITIES that tell us *things*
are settled & closed, & there is NOTHING we can do to
change that.
They rear their heads at every stage of the journey

and keep us *passive, accommodating and depressed.*

And those giants all have names...

as a young adult I was very aware of Giants with names like: *Money, Beauty and Intellect...*

The tentacles of these powers kept reminding me of all that I wasn't and all that I needed in order to be a valid competitor in this world.

And their voice? Well it was always bellowing: *MORE!*

COSUME MORE! GET MORE! YOU NEED MORE!

We know that if someone makes \$350,000 a year, they are in the top 1% of the country, but what we forget is that if we make \$35,000 a year we are in the top 1% of the world. THE GIANT OF CONSUMERISM wants us to see the half empty cup, forget our privilege, ignore the great disparity and live well (while the rest of the world goes to hell).

As a young seminary student in the 70's, I was struck by the metaphor here in the book of Numbers...

"Giants who reduce us to GRASSHOPPERS!" ...

This image *gripped* me, because I knew too well *the weak knees of the grasshopper.*

I felt squeezed and boxed in by powers that erected WALLS around whose gifts were welcome in the Church WALLS that defined who could or could not be called to serve.

Giants LOVE WALLS.

And we are all aware of the GIANT that has plagued the church since Constantine... *Nationalism ... the*

Nation is always vying for our ultimate allegiance. Put your hand on your heart and “*BOW DOWN!*” This giant urges us to see ourselves as Special and Righteous, & the rest of the world as OTHER and LESS.

And there are other giants... ENORMOUS ones: Nuclear weapons, Global Warming, Corporate Conglomerates, Lobbyists ...

This week I was behind a pick up that had a sticker in the window:

“ NRA... STAND UP AND FIGHT!”

Giants have many minions and keep pointing out our littleness in the face of their great power.

“They are huge, and we grasshoppers!”

Well , maybe, (just maybe) the high school youth of our nation can lead us in confronting this one...And we can join the March in 2 weeks that will take place in Goshen to address gun violence and gun laws.!

THERE are SO MANY GIANTS...and as we age the Giants we face have new names like:
diminishment, illness, loss and death.

I remember when my elderly aunt was diagnosed with a golf ball sized tumor in her small intestine...COLON CANCER!

She had been the spiritual guide in our family, always walking so close to Jesus, and helping the rest of the family see the WAY. Now she was faced with a host of really hard decisions, and when I asked this solid saint how she was *accessing the peace of Christ* in all of this,

she said...

"Well, now you tell me how to do that!"

I had no easy answers!

But I do come back to this passage in John 14:

Here Jesus sits at the TABLE on the last night of his life.
He sits there with a *fearful, little band of disciples... who are wanted people in a hostile Jerusalem.*

And he offers these little "grasshoppers,"
who must be scared spitless,

this WILD PEACE in the terrifying wilderness...

GOD'S peace...a PEACE the world does not know...

JESUS' PEACE that confounds the Giants.

"That peace I give to YOU!" he says.

Hmmm...

In a few hours we will find Jesus in the garden...

Sweating drops of blood in fear and foreboding about what lies ahead for him...

PEACE???

Where is the peace when JESUS is SO AFRAID?

THEN... we will find Jesus being mocked and shamed
and led to execution...

And the next day we will hear his heartcry from the
cross:

"My God, My God, WHY?..."

Why have you forsaken me?"

Where is the Peace of Jesus in this moment of
utter abandonment, loneliness, and loss?

It seems that the PEACE Jesus is offering his followers in the face of awesome GIANTS is a relationship large enough to withstand it all... our fears... our anger... our confusion and questions.

The Peace Jesus offers looks like COURAGE... courage to name our fears & confront the worst. THE PEACE OF JESUS looks the GIANTS in the eye and knows they have NO POWER over our souls! THERE is a bigger authority because... *What if the mightiest word is LOVE?*

This was a tagline that Heidi Siemens Rhodes had on her email before and during her terminal illness. Heidi (as you likely know) was a mother of 3 and a pastor who died a few years ago on her 38th birthday.

So I ask Heidi's question:
WHAT IF THE MIGHTIEST WORD IS LOVE?

*Well then, all will be well and all will be well,
And we can live and work toward fulfillment.
Then in the wilderness we can entrust the struggle and the pain to GOD. And in our convoluted living in a broken and oppressive world, we can find our refuge and strength in the one who wants to assure us that the MIGHTIEST WORD IS LOVE!*

When we breathe in this good news, then we can also begin to take in what Jesus is offering his followers at that table on their worst night: A PEACE the world does not know. AND maybe we can access the Peace that

offers WILD COURAGE in the face of Powers and wrong that seems off so strong.

The kind of peace that Martin Luther King, Jr. received that night when the GIANTS of RACISM were threatening to *bomb his home and children*, that night he wanted to *throw in the towel* to his involvement in the movement...

the night he had that cup of coffee at midnight and heard the voice that said:

Stand up Martin.

Stand up for Justice!

Stand up for righteousness!

and I will be with you ALWAYS!

That night Martin crossed the bridge of fear and knew that *LOVE IS the mightiest word*.

Maybe we can access the kind of courage that my friend Willi-Hugo Perez's Mother exercised.

Her husband had been *abducted & taken away* to be *murdered* by the GIANT Guatemalan Military, and later that same GIANT came into the classroom where she was teaching to take HER away...Willi's mother (the elementary teacher) called Willi and his sister forward, took their hands and said to the soldiers,

"If you are going to shoot me then do it right here."

Then... this woman of wild courage looked the soldiers in the eye and began reciting:

"The LORD IS MY Shepherd" and by the end of the Psalm, the soldiers had retreated & never came back.

I want Father Alfred Delp's wild courage that led him (in that German concentration camp) to *request entry*

into the *lice-infested, rat-infested, fever-infested* barracks (where no SS officer would go), so that he could share the compassionate peace of Christ with *miserably suffering, dying* people, knowing it would cost him his own life.

I want the kind of Courage that stood up and said “NO” to the building of a detention center in a county where so many immigrants reside... believing that the GIANT block called “ICE” could be *melted* in Elkhart County. I want the *kind of Love for our neighbors* that caused Richard Aguirre and others sitting right here to face down that looming GIANT. And just say “NO”.

“NO” was Rachel Corey’s word, too, as she stood before that GIANT bulldozer about to demolish another Palestinian home with a WILD COURAGE that took her life, but did not destroy her trust that
LOVE IS The mightiest WORD...

Courage in the face of looming GIANTS is hard to access when we *feel helpless and stomped on*, when the NEWS keeps blaring vulgarities, violence and disregard for the poor.

And perhaps you, like me, get weary and wonder,
Well, What can WE DO?

HOWARD ZINN says,

“We can remember those who have acted magnificently and let that give us energy to act and at least offer the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a new direction.

And we don't have to wait for some utopian future, but if we live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us...that is itself a marvelous victory."

And Oscar Romero reminds us that :

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something,

and to do it very well. It may be incomplete,

but it is a beginning, a step along the way,

an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

Maybe we are little grasshoppers, but our knees do not have to be weak.. Jesus offers even grasshoppers amidst the GIANTS

a PEACE the world does not know,

wild courage to enter into the transforming promise,

and know we are threatened only with resurrection,

because LOVE **IS** THE MIGHTIEST WORD.