
Purity Insistence and Empire Arrogance

(I am reading Numbers 11 in my Bible studies this week. This article is from my sermon of September 27, 2015.)

An article for the *Cathedral Times* by the Very Rev. Sam Candler

In Numbers 11, the people complain, "Why have you brought us out to the desert? We would rather be back where the food was delicious. We remember the fish and the melons and the onions and garlic and leeks of Egypt!" Yes, the Hebrews, in their anxiety and distress, are so upset that they are longing to return to the conditions of slavery. Such is the human condition!

Moses, in turn, great leader that he was, turns to deliver the same sort of complaint to his Lord! Moses asks God, "Why have you treated me so badly? Why have you laid the burden of all these weeping people on me?" "I am not able to carry the burden of this people alone," Moses says. He is exasperated.

So, according to the story, Yahweh commands Moses to specify seventy people, seventy elders, and take them to the Tent of Meeting. There, Yahweh will take some of the spirit that Moses has and place it upon the heads of the seventy elders. Thus, the leadership assigned to Moses will be distributed and delegated. Moses' burden will be mitigated; and the people will actually be cared for in a better way, with distributed leadership. It's a great story about distributed authority, again a story with much to teach us in our own time, and in any time. Authority that rests in only one individual, even if that person is wonderful, is not as effective and healthy as distributed authority!

But something crazy happens! When these newly ordained seventy elders have received the spirit and are prophesying healthily, why, they hear about two other people. Apparently, Eldad and Medad, way outside the tent, are not with the seventy properly ordained elders; and, yet, some of the spirit has come upon them, too, and they are prophesying! Joshua comes running up to Moses and says, "Moses! Stop them! They are not with us!"

Moses, in his expansive wisdom, recognizes immediately what has occurred. "Are you jealous for my sake?" he asks, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!" That is, the Lord's spirit is larger than any one set of people, or any one system, or any one authority. There is enough of the Lord's spirit to rest upon all of God's people, not just those properly delegated and ordained, not just upon the chosen few, not just upon the ideologically pure.

Ideological purity. In many of our strongest institutions today, there exists a self-destructive illness which has been inside humanity for our entire existence. I call it an illness, but it is really a psychological predilection marked by twin viruses: the virus of purity insistence, and the virus of empire arrogance. In politics, in church, in society, purity insistence and empire arrogance clamor for "all or nothing" strategies: "my way or the highway," they say. "If you are not exactly for me and like me, then I am against you."

There is a disturbing similarity between purity insistence and empire arrogance. The church is at its worst when it is tempted towards empire, when it wants to anoint emperors instead of servants, when its leaders think leadership is simply making sweeping and absolutist pronouncements. Even when those pronouncements seem good, and even when we might agree with them, if the nature of those pronouncements is imperial, then a dangerous disease is imminent.

The church is also at its worst when it insists on purity, when it demands that every member follow every jot and tittle of whatever the contemporary standard of law is. And remember: every party, every religious system, contains some sort of law. Democrats have their liberal markers, and republicans have their conservative ones.

So do churches. We have little markers, indicators, litmus tests, of whether someone is with us or against us. Those litmus tests are our purity indicators.

I am reminded that the way of Jesus is not the way of "All or Nothing." At Mark 9:38-40, Jesus says, "Do not stop him; ...whoever is not against us is for us." Great governments include strong voices who honor and respect those across the aisle. Great churches recognize that the Spirit of God is larger than any one party or doctrine. While seventy leaders are being ordained in the main tent, let Eldad and Medad prophesy enthusiastically in another place. Our energy and good will need not be diminished because someone else, not with us, is doing something equally good!

The way of Jesus lets other disciples, not only his own, also cast out demons and heal the sick. You don't have to agree with my politics for me to appreciate the good that you are doing in the world. You don't have to be a member of my church, or of my religion, or of my group of disciples, for the Spirit of God to be at work in you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip