

Ordinary B-26
2018

Over our three-year liturgical cycle, there is only one time we hear a Sunday reading from the Book of Numbers. Maybe because there is a lot in this book about census figures and cultic rules – but there are some narratives too.

Today's story comes from what is called "the murmuring tradition": in the Book of Numbers there are many incidents of grumbling and rebellion against God and by the people in the desert, as they are left to wander for forty years before entering the land they are promised.

There are complaints against Moses and the authority of Moses, against Aaron, the lack of meat and water; most complaints repeat themselves, even though they bring on suffering and in some instances, God sends relief.

I imagine Moses putting hands over the ears and shouting "Enough" when he hears the complaint that some in their midst are prophesying without authorization; Moses is quick to assert that the work of God takes precedence over the institutional ordering of the community and he prayerfully muses, "If only all God's people were prophets!"

Jesus echoes the same sentiment: the movement of the Spirit of God is not confined to human structures, policies, or customs.

Look, says Jesus: you know what it's like when someone offers you a cup of cold water, don't you? That generous person belongs to God as much as you do! Be careful that you do not allow your sense of yourself to get in the way of living God's life within you.

So here is a story about a cup of water. It is about two famous women, Eleanor Roosevelt and Mary McLeod Bethune,

Mary McLeod Bethune, an African-American daughter of former slaves, wanted to be a missionary, but no church would sponsor her. So she became an educator, moved to Florida, and established a boarding school for girls, which later merged to become Bethune-Cookman College. She was a forceful champion of racial and gender equality, and a friend of Eleanor Roosevelt, who was years ahead of her husband on issues of equality.

While speaking at a benefit for Bethune-Cookman College, Miss Bethune's voice went dry. Mrs. Roosevelt was on the platform and rose to procure a glass of water for Miss Bethune, a simple gesture that did not go unnoticed and attracted public attention, both scornful and laudatory.

I read this story several years ago but hesitated to tell it, because to some it will sound like the tired tale of a white person coming to the rescue of a person of color.

But I have been thinking about this story the past couple of weeks and have a different take. In accepting the glass of water, Mary McLeod Bethune joins Eleanor Roosevelt in a prophetic act. She completes the equation, so to speak. She did not refuse the water, nor defer, nor say let me get you some water, Mrs. Roosevelt.”

This act of accepting the water is a powerful witness, for realize that this occurred during the days of Jim Crow, when black people could not drink at the same water fountain as white people. So here are two strong, committed women challenging the injustice of the day and breaking with institutional racism.

The sharing of the cup of water takes place within what I like to call “the small exchange” – small not as in insignificant, but as in quiet, unnoticed, unexpected – yet exchanges that are grace-filled, life-giving, prophetic.

This is how peace is made; how justice is advanced; how communal bonds are forged – one small step, one small word, one small gesture, one cup of water, time and time again.

Think of how our national discussions and political debates would change if our leaders re-learned how to do this. But regardless, it is within our power and our range of possibility to offer generously and humbly, and to accept gratefully and humbly, the cup of water.

The writer of the letter of James advocates a living faith and a practical love. The writer is concerned with behavior. The message we hear today is a prophetic rage against the insolence of the rich who have withheld wages from their laborers.

Today's gospel is almost a reenactment of what we hear in the first reading: Jesus is also concerned about behavior and how we live our lives in humble and generous service.