

Pentecost 19—B
Numbers 11:16, 24-29
We're on the Same Team!

Have you ever watched a T-ball game? If you do, you will split your sides with laughter. I am convinced that anyone could win \$10,000 on “America’s Funniest Home Videos” if he just visited any T-ball diamond with a video camera.

I especially like the first few games of the year. The players only remember about half the rules. It makes for some great moments, like when the batter hits the ball off the tee and then runs as fast as he can, but to third base instead of first. Sometimes a player will make a heroic effort to catch a ball but once he catches it, he gets so excited that he forgets to throw it. He just stands there while the runners round the bases.

My all-time favorite is when the ball rolls past every defender and out to the fence. Often two players will get to the ball at the same time. One will grab the ball while the other is falling over him. Then they will start to fight over the ball. Just when one is about to throw it, his teammate knocks the ball out of his hand and tries to pick it up and throw it himself. There they stand fighting over the ball in the outfield while the folks in the bleachers roar.

Once when I was laughing at one of these struggles over the ball, I heard the coach shout from the dugout a one-liner that has become a motto for me as a Christian. He shouted at the top of his lungs: “Same team! Same team!” The players spun and looked at him. Then one gave up the struggle while the other threw the ball into second base. It was a little late to stop the runner from getting home, but those two little words from the coach communicated volumes to the budding athletes.

“Same team!” It says a lot, doesn’t it? It isn’t just true for T-ball teams. It’s true for God’s church, too.

The First Lesson for this Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost doesn’t contain a historical account of some ancient t-ball game gone bad, but we do find a similar situation in Numbers chapter 11. Allow me to set the background. Moses had been leading the people of Israel through the desert as they journeyed to the Promised Land. But the people kept grumbling and complaining, and finally Moses had enough. He went to the Lord and said he couldn’t handle it anymore. So the Lord provided him with some leadership relief. *“The LORD said to Moses: ‘Bring me seventy of Israel’s elders who are known to you as leaders and officials among the people. Have them come to the Tent of Meeting, that they may stand there with you.’”* These seventy men were chosen to help alleviate some of the burden that was on Moses’ shoulders.

“[Moses] brought together seventy of their elders and had them stand around the Tent. Then the LORD came down in the cloud and spoke with him, and he took of the Spirit that was on him and put the Spirit on the seventy elders. When the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied, but they did not do so again.” I suppose we could compare these events to a modern day installation service for a new pastor. As these men gathered around the Tent of Meeting, the Lord allowed them to prophesy as a way to verify that he had called them to serve and to help lead the people. What exactly this “prophesying” entailed we are not sure; we simply know that as a way of confirming their call to service, the Lord used these men as mouthpieces to speak his will for a time.

For reasons not revealed to us, two of these seventy men did not walk out to the Tent of Meeting while this “installation rite” was taking place. Their names were Eldad and Medad. They remained in the camp with the rest of the people. But their absence did not disqualify them

from the installation rite that was taking place at the Tent of Meeting. *“The Spirit also rested on them, and they prophesied in the camp. A young man ran and told Moses, ‘Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.’”*

With the limited details given us, it’s hard to say with certainty what form this prophesying took, but it was obvious that the words these two men spoke among the people in the main Israelite camp were words given them by God as a sign of their call to serve as leaders of the people. The problem was that some, yes, even Moses’ right hand man, Joshua, thought that this was a problem rather than a blessing. *“Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses’ aide since youth, spoke up and said, ‘Moses, my lord, stop them!’ But Moses replied, ‘Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!’”* Joshua saw this as a case of prophetic interference. He thought these two men were interfering with business from which they should have stayed clear. He thought these two men were taking glory away from Moses by proclaiming the Lord’s will in a miraculous way in the midst of the people. But Moses saw it differently. He didn’t see this as a case of interference. He saw it as teamwork. “Don’t stop them,” Moses would have said, “because we’re all on the same team.”

Here’s a way to illustrate the point. If I were to take another candle and light it from one of the altar candles, the altar candle would not burn less just because its flame was used to light another candle. No, we could light a thousand candles from this one altar candle, but it would still burn just as brightly. When God calls other people to serve as his representatives and messengers, just as he did with the seventy elders in this reading, he’s not snuffing out a call or a spiritual gift from someone else. He’s lighting another candle; he’s producing yet another spokesman who will shine the light of the gospel to those in the darkness of sin. Or, to use a different analogy, he’s adding even more players to his team.

Just like T-ball, Christianity is a team sport. God gave us the same jersey in our baptism; a beautiful jersey made white in Christ’s righteousness with red letters embossed by his blood. The hat we wear is the helmet of salvation. It guarantees that each of us will get the free popsicle at the end of the game when we go to heaven. The jersey and hat remind us that we are on the same team. As believers we realize that this unity as God’s team is more important than individual success.

We are in a team sport, not a boxing match where you enter the ring alone and slug it out with the enemy until one or the other drops in defeat. If the team doesn’t finish together, then it has failed. If everyone doesn’t show up to play together, then the entire team has to forfeit. We are a team. Teams play together, or they don’t play at all. Jesus said it was how all men would know that we are his disciples. They would know when they saw us love one another. They would know when we play as a team.

Sometimes we Christians look a little humorous as we try to play the game of life together with our teammates. We are like those children in their first few games of T-ball. We have heard all the rules, but we don’t always remember to put them into practice. Sometimes we look like the little guys standing in the outfield fighting over the ball. That’s when God reminds us from his Word, “Same team!”

You see, Satan likes to make us think that the ministry is a popularity contest. He likes to get us to pit people against people. Satan doesn’t want God’s people to think that they are on the same team together; he wants to divide and conquer. He wants to set us against each other. Instead of called servants of the Word who serve in harmony, he wants disgruntled servants who cause tension and discord. Instead of people working together to bring the gospel to the world,

he wants Christians opposing each other to bring headaches into the church. And Satan is more successful at making that happen than we'd like to admit most days. When church leaders manipulate things to go their way, God shouts: "Same team!" When a member leaves a voter's meeting angry and bitter that he didn't get his way, God says: "Same team!" When members of the same church see their fellow believers as competition rather than as friends and family, God says: "Same team!"

Ministry is not a competition. We're not playing against each other, vying for a title or award that declares me to be the winner. No, we're on the same team. But it is so easy to forget that. How easy it is to see the faults in the other members of the church or the called workers of the church and use that as grounds for gossip and complaints instead of an opportunity to build up and encourage each other when we are weak. When that happens, when we live like we're playing on different teams, Satan has not only divided us against ourselves; he's divided us from our God. He's succeeded all too often in redirecting our attention away from the gospel that saves and from our Savior who saves. He's succeeded all too often in luring us onto his team, but we know that when the final whistle blows, Satan's team will come in last, and the only thing that team will have in store is a hellish future.

The T-ball coach used this "Same team!" mantra for many situations. Once he had a starter sit out so another player could get some game time. The starter began to pout. He was reminded that his replacement was on the same team. Sometimes God has us sit out of the game so another believer can play our position. That's when we need to remember: "Same team!" Then we will stop pouting, get off the bench, go to the fence, clench it with our little hands, and cheer on our teammate as he or she does his or her best for the Lord.

I once saw a shortstop who would catch the ball and then try to run it to first instead of throwing it. He had no confidence in the first baseman. Guess what his coach shouted to him. You got it: "Same team!" When we act as if we are the only ones on the team that can do God's work effectively, he shouts "Same team!" to us, too. We have teammates chosen by the Lord to work with us. He wants us to play the game together. Will the other teammates drop the ball? Sometimes—but it is more important to work together with fellow believers than to do everything perfectly by ourselves.

Satan tries to divide us, but in Christ we are reunited to God. Satan has dragged us into sin and death, but in Christ we have been freed from sin's punishment and death's prison. Satan has lured us and our sinful natures onto his team, but through faith in Christ we have been bought back and reunited with the God who created us in love and sent his Son to save us in love. The innocent blood our Savior Jesus shed on that painful, Good Friday cross, broke down the barrier that stood between God and us. The empty grave that Jesus defeated on that joyful Easter Sunday opened the gates to heaven that restore our relationship to God, that place us back on his team, that declare us forgiven and loved people through his Son, Jesus.

But there are still more open spots on God's heavenly roster. Unlike baseball or football, there are no limits to the number of members that can be on this divine team that we call Christianity. And so as forgiven, blood-bought, reunited children of God, there's no need for us to pit pastor or principal or parishioner against each other. There's no need for us to place a giant divide between church members, to create a church full of cliques instead of a church filled with Christian gratitude and zeal. We're on the same team. We've been bought by the same gracious Lord. We're working toward the same goal. We have no reason to interfere with the work of the kingdom. Instead, let's look forward to the victory celebration secured by our Savior and prepared for each one of us, the members of his team. Amen.

Hymns: 586, 471, 469, 462