

Numbers 11:24-30
June 12, 2011

South Plains
Dedication Sunday

Spreading The Wealth

This is a big day for South Plains Presbyterian Church with the Dedication of Kirk Hall. Now and again, I'm asked why we named the new building "Kirk Hall." I cannot tell you how South Plains arrived at that name, but I did a little homework on the word itself. It turns out that "kirk" is not only a Scottish word meaning "church," with roots extending into Middle English and German and Norse, but those roots also go back to the Greek word in the New Testament for "Lord." So Kirk Hall is the church hall, or the people's hall and most importantly the Lord's hall.

It's appropriate that this dedication falls on Pentecost Sunday, the day the church celebrates the power of the Holy Spirit igniting Christ's mission to all the world. Kirk Hall is a booster rocket for our church in Keswick. This church has been sharing the gospel of Christ for 192 years. As far back as anyone here today can remember, the people of this congregation have dreamed of more space for Christ's mission. We've been waiting a long time. Recall that Jesus instructed his disciples to wait. They were to wait in Jerusalem; and he promised them power when the Holy Spirit came. On the day of the Jewish festival of Pentecost, God demonstrated the Spirit's power by making it possible for people from all over the known world to understand the

disciples' witness. For the young church, this was the sign of God leading them to tell the world the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It was not the first appearance of Holy Spirit power, however. Old Testament prophets spoke in the power of God's Spirit. The little story we heard this morning from the book of Numbers illustrates the presence of the Holy Spirit among God's people, both then and now.

The incident occurred during the long trek through the wilderness, after they escaped from Egypt across the Red Sea, but before they arrived in the Promised Land. God had been feeding the people a special trail mix called manna, which we think was like a sticky, sweet substance found in that region of the world. But, the people were not satisfied with having enough calories to keep going through the wilderness. They romanticized their former life as Egyptian slaves (if you can imagine romanticizing slavery), and they complained that Moses should give them fish and leeks and cucumbers and melons like they remembered in Egypt. Predictably, Moses got pretty tired of listening to their gripes. It seems God was getting pretty tired of them too.

One of the most dangerous complaints of people living under a dictatorship is their lack of food. Food riots are a potent factor in revolutions in Africa and the Middle East today. However, Moses was not a dictator. He had been reluctant to lead Israel from the beginning. So he

complains to God in a colorful prayer just before our reading today. “Did I conceive all these people?” he asks God. “Did I give birth to them that you should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries a sucking child,’ to the land that you promised?” Pretty bold stuff from Moses. Moses knew how to pray to get God’s attention. Well, God responds to the food problem even though that is only a symptom of a larger problem. The larger problem, God’s knows, is too much dependency on Moses. Perhaps, as we shall see, Moses and his advisors unconsciously enabled that dependency.

God’s solution is for Moses to delegate responsibility. Moses gathered 70 elders at the tent of meeting, the tabernacle where God regularly met Moses to talk. God took some of Moses’ prophetic spirit and gave it to the seventy. Now, they began to prophesy. Notice that two things are happening here. On the one hand, the story makes absolutely clear who is in charge. Moses knows all too well it was the Lord who started the Egyptian slave revolt; it was the Lord who created an escape route through the Red Sea; and it was the Lord who brought them safely to Sinai and into the wilderness. At every turn, they depended upon the grace of God for direction and survival.

On the other hand, Moses is clearly their leader. He is God’s choice to shepherd the people to Canaan. Moses’ authority and power derives from the presence of the Holy Spirit. That’s why Moses is called a prophet. Moses has the talking stick. Do you know about the

talking stick? Around the campfire with girl scouts and boy scouts, it helps to have a talking stick. Only the scout with the talking stick has permission to speak. Moses did not have to have any ordinary sign of authority, although he did have a wonderful staff. God had done so many amazing things through Moses that no one questioned his position. Or, did they?

Joshua, the administrative assistant at this point in the story, worried about Moses’ reputation. And, when two young guns among the elders started prophesying outside the tent of meeting, outside the traditional boundaries for the Spirit of God, Joshua got worried. Their names were Eldad and Medad. I guess Joshua was afraid El and Me would look like leaders and would be a threat to Moses’ authority. When he found out they were prophesying outside the tent of meeting, he ran to tell his boss, “My lord Moses, stop them! Stop them!” We can imagine what Joshua was thinking. Don’t give them an inch or they’ll take a mile. Don’t let them usurp your authority by speaking for God.

Moses’ reply is classic. “Are you jealous for my sake?” he says. “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!” That’s the prayer of a real leader: Empower everyone, God. Spread the wealth around. Let each person participate. Let loose the energy and enthusiasm of God’s Spirit among the people of God. Moses could not do it all by himself. Even with the prophetic spirit of Almighty God, Moses got sick and tired of dealing with

people because despite their best efforts people will act like people.

By spreading leadership responsibility among the seventy elders, God not only relieved him of some of the burden, God also empowered them to grow beyond the mindset of slaves whose every move was directed by the slave master. He enabled the people to take more responsibility themselves for their own welfare. God showed him how to give away the power of God's spirit.

How did South Plains manage to build Kirk Hall? How did a modest, country church whose dreams for more space had been frustrated for thirty years or more, how did you come up with this beautiful building? It happened because the Holy Spirit moved among you, inspired you, excited you and ultimately led you to this place. It is possible, of course, to build a church another way. But, healthy church buildings usually come from hard, inspirited effort on the part of many Christians.

If you are a recent arrival at South Plains, I can assure you that the fun is not over. We moved into Kirk Hall about eight weeks ago. We are still moving furniture and finding out how the building works. Every day you are discovering new things, or rather I should say that God is showing us new ways to make Kirk Hall more beautiful, more useful and more effective in our witness to this community and to the ends of the earth. Because the Holy Spirit keeps moving among this congregation, we will keep sharing the wealth of inspiration handed

down from past generations to us. What's more, we will keep sharing the wealth of God's Spirit with neighbors near and far.

. "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!" That's a pretty good prayer for the next 192 years. One of the most attractive qualities about South Plains is the wealth of leadership. Many of you have noticed that when we ordain officers, we ask all elders and ministers to come up front for the laying on of hands. Typically, two thirds of the congregation on any given Sunday will come forward for his symbolic handing on of the Spirit of leadership. We have a long tradition of sharing the wealth. May it continue.