

Numbers 11:24-30 (The Message)

²⁴⁻²⁵ So Moses went out and told the people what GOD had said. He called together seventy of the leaders and had them stand around the Tent. GOD came down in a cloud and spoke to Moses and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy leaders. When the Spirit rested on them they prophesied. But they didn't continue; it was a one-time event.

²⁶ Meanwhile two men, Eldad and Medad, had stayed in the camp. They were listed as leaders but they didn't leave camp to go to the Tent. Still, the Spirit also rested on them and they prophesied in the camp.

²⁷ A young man ran and told Moses, "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp!"

²⁸ Joshua son of Nun, who had been Moses' right-hand man since his youth, said, "Moses, master! Stop them!"

²⁹ But Moses said, "Are you jealous for me? Would that all GOD's people were prophets. Would that GOD would put his Spirit on all of them."

³⁰⁻³⁴ Then Moses and the leaders of Israel went back to the camp.

Elmom and Memom

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

Date: May 11, 2008

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Text: *Numbers 11:24-30*

In 1974 a declining black Baptist church in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, New York called a twenty-six year-old pastor named Johnny Ray Youngblood. In an un auspicious beginning, only 84 of the 250 active members welcomed him; the other 166 left the church. That was then. Now is now. And now St. Paul Community Baptist Church has 8,000 members and a \$6 million budget, and Youngblood is still at the helm.

When Youngblood arrived there were hardly any men in the church. The men in the community found the church irrelevant, and they distrusted pastors. As far as they were concerned, women went to church and the pastor had one hand in their pocketbooks and the other, well, just let me say, somewhere else. And yet as Youngblood looked out over the section of Brooklyn where his church was located, he saw crime, unemployment, and drug addiction. He knew that the men needed the church as much as the church needed the men.

Youngblood decided then and there that St. Paul would reach out to the men in the community. There would be men-only groups. There would be men in the leadership. There would be leadership training and mutual support. The Bible would be talked about in a way that men could understand.

The centerpiece group that he formed was the Eldad and Medad Bible study group. By Youngblood's reckoning the men of the community were like Eldad and Medad. Moses called seventy leaders to the tent to be ordained. But Eldad and Medad weren't in the tent. They didn't go to the meeting. They stayed in the camp. But the spirit came onto them anyway. And they prophesied in the camp.

Now, some of the other leaders were flabbergasted. Eldad and Medad weren't authorized to prophesy. They hadn't been at the tent. They weren't in the church. They were just out there prophesying away in the streets. The other leaders wanted Moses to put a stop to it.

But Moses didn't want to exclude Eldad and Medad. They were out there in the community filled with the spirit. Moses said that he wished everyone would be like Eldad and Medad.

Johnny Ray Youngblood looked out on the streets of his community, and he saw a lot of men who weren't in the church but who had a lot to say. Some were broken. Some were angry. Most of them had rough edges. But they were also prophesiers of the truth. Like Moses, Youngblood said, "I need these people. I need these men. I wish everyone would prophesy like they are."

So he badgered them. He swore at them. He kept telling them to come. And finally they did. And Johnny Ray Youngblood knew that he had to name them Eldad and Medad, for they were once outside the tent, outside the church, and there were those who thought they were worthless and should have stayed outside. But Youngblood knew they belonged in the tent, in the church, in the leadership. And so he called them Eldad and Medad. And they prophesied in

the church.

St. Paul's men's ministry was on fire. It grew and grew. After awhile there were more men than there were women. And there were all these men's groups, and men's boards, and men's leadership. Finally, some of the women began to feel like they were no longer in the tent. They were feeling left out. And they were right. And to make their point, they made their own group. They said if the men could have their own group, Eldad and Medad, they could have their's too, and they named it Elmom and Memom.

So, now you see how the wheels in my mind turn. Today is Pentecost, and the reading from Numbers, about the 70 prophesying and the spirit coming upon Eldad and Medad is one of the Pentecost Sunday readings. Today is also Mother's Day, so I got Elmom and Memom in there, too. And, wallah, you've got Pentecost and Mother's Day put together.

It gets better. It turns out that the history of Mother's Day has a lot to do with people outside the tent prophesying with the spirit. In 1858, the year Lincoln won the presidential election, the movement toward the American Civil War had passed the point of no return. In a campaign speech Lincoln claimed, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." But already the house was splitting apart.

In that same year Ann Jarvis, a young Appalachian homemaker began a movement to improve public health and sanitation through what she called Mothers' Work Days. Soon her work took on added urgency, because once the war began, the wounds from the battlefield festered in the unsanitary conditions of military camps and hospitals in greater numbers than the bullets and canon balls themselves. Ann Jarvis organized women throughout the Civil War to work for better sanitary conditions for both the North and the South. Ann Jarvis was not a recognized leader. She wasn't a general or a politician. She didn't make the big decisions. She wasn't in the tent, so to speak. But she was a Elmom and a Memom. Ann Jarvis recognized that while sanitation was of great importance, the greater disease was the war itself. The physical and emotional anguish that precipitated was unspeakable. And so, after the war, in 1868, Ann Jarvis began work to reconcile Union and Confederate neighbors, in many cases families that had built hatred toward one another.

In recognition of Ann Jarvis's work and her call for Mothers' Work Days, 1858 is often termed the beginning of Mother's Day.

The social activist Julia Ward Howe was influenced by Ann Jarvis. In 1870, she wrote the Mother's Day Proclamation as a call for peace and disarmament. It was intended as a call to unite women against war. Howe was another Elmom and Memom. And her prophecy was not heard. She was left outside the tent. She wrote the proclamation, but no one would listen. She failed in her attempt to get formal recognition of a Mother's Day for Peace.

Meanwhile, Ann Jarvis continued her work, mostly under the radar. She had a family, including a daughter Anna. Ann Jarvis died in 1905, on the second Sunday in May, May 9. Ann's daughter Anna took up the old cause that there be a recognition of Mother's Day for peace. Three years later, on May 10, 1908 the first official Mother's Day was celebrated in Grafton, West Virginia in the church where Ann had taught Sunday School. This time it caught on. By 1912 most states recognized Mother's Day. And in 1914 President Woodrow Wilson declared the first national Mother's Day, as a day for American citizens to show the flag in honor of those mothers whose sons had died in war. It's interesting to note that already the critical edge was dulled. What the Elmom and Memom women had worked for was a day for peace and

disarmament. What they got was a day to recognize those who had lost sons in war, a noble cause, to be sure. But what the Elmom and Memom women—Ann and Anna Jarvis and Julia Ward Howe—had wanted was that mothers not lose any more sons to war.

In 1923, just nine years after the first official Mother's Day, commercialization of the U.S. holiday had become so rampant that Anna Jarvis herself became a major opponent of celebrating Mother's Day. Oh well.

Now, this morning I don't want to be the grinch who stole Mother's Day. I like the idea of honoring our mothers, or better yet, what we do here—honor the women. I don't think there are ever too many opportunities to say thank you to one another. Pancakes and eggs in the morning. A nice dinner out. A card. Some roses. Some chocolates. Hey, I spent part of yesterday smoking ribs for the woman in life for dinner tonight. I have no quibble with any of it.

The only worry I have at all is that we don't have anything like the events that the Jarvisses and Howe envisioned. Eldad and Medad were outside the tent, not in the mainstream, and the people didn't want to hear them. So it is with the Elmoms and the Memoms, too. Often they have an important prophecy for us, but they don't get a full hearing. I'm with Moses on this one. We need voices outside the tent that raise concerns, concerns that may make us a little squeamish, a little uncomfortable, or at least make us stop long enough to look at ourselves with humility and honesty.

The day we celebrate today looks back to three women who were such voices. Their heads were not filled with politics, or war strategies, or cheering for their side. They were in touch with the real losses of warfare—to limbs and lives, to families and neighbors, to flesh and to mind—and they wanted to prophesy the rather simple but hardly simpleminded truth that the anguish ought stop. On this day, on which we remember the women who gave each of us life, can there be any doubt that in that moment when they looked into our faces for the first time, and saw with amazement what their life had given life to, that they hoped we would live in a better world? Is that not the heart of the matter? No matter how some mothers later fail their children, and regrettably some do terribly, in that moment of birthing are they not Elmoms and Memoms, women with clear and right visions of life?

So, I would ask only this. However you will celebrate the rest of this day, take a moment at some point to touch that moment when you were born, when someone dearly wanted a better world to place you in. She wanted to give that to you. And though she might not have been thinking this far ahead, I'm willing to bet that if someone had asked her, she would have said that she hoped you would not only find yourself in a better world, but you would also, in your day, dream a better world, too. For they, like Moses, would only wish that everyone would be prophets like Elmom and Memom. Amen.