

Holy Cross, Daggett and St. Mark, Wallace Lutheran Churches, Michigan

March 3, 2013

Numbers 16:23-40

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Say to the assembly, 'Move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.'" Moses got up and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. He warned the assembly, "Move back from the tents of these wicked men! Do not touch anything belonging to them, or you will be swept away because of all their sins."

So they moved away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram. Dathan and Abiram had come out and were standing with their wives, children and little ones at the entrances to their tents. Then Moses said, "This is how you will know that the LORD has sent me to do all these things and that it was not my idea: If these men die a natural death and experience only what usually happens to men, then the LORD has not sent me. But if the LORD brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the grave, then you will know that these men have treated the LORD with contempt."

As soon as he finished saying all this, the ground under them split apart and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them, with their households and all Korah's men and all their possessions. They went down alive into the grave, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community. At their cries, all the Israelites around them fled, shouting, "The earth is going to swallow us too!" And fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense.

The LORD said to Moses, "Tell Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest, to take the censers out of the smoldering remains and scatter the coals some distance away, for the censers are holy— the censers of the men who sinned at the cost of their lives. Hammer the censers into sheets to overlay the altar, for they were presented before the LORD and have become holy. Let them be a sign to the Israelites." So Eleazar the priest collected the bronze censers brought by those who had been burned up, and he had them hammered out to overlay the altar, as the LORD directed him through Moses. This was to remind the Israelites that no one except a descendant of Aaron should come to burn incense before the LORD, or he would become like Korah and his followers.

What do I need to do that for? How come I have to shovel the side walk while my brother Don doesn't have to? Why do I need to do the dishes? Isn't it my sister Faye's turn? Do I have to? Do conversations like these ever enter into your homes? Mom or dad asks one of their children to do something, but instead of doing what mom or dad asks the child objects and complains with quotes like, "I don't want to do it. Make someone else do it. Why do you keep bossing me around?"

Sound familiar? What if the example is a boss asking you to do something at work which you don't want to do? What if it is complaining about how a police officer pulls you, and you alone, out of a group of speeding cars over and writes you a ticket? At first these examples might sound harmless, even bring a smile or two to your faces because you know exactly what I am talking about, but what happens if this rebellious attitude goes unchecked? What would it look like?

It would look like our Old Testament reading for today. Our Old Testament lesson puts us right in the middle of a rebellion which was going on against Moses and Aaron who were serving as leaders of God's people. Our lesson kind of plops us right down in the middle of this story and we should really back up a little bit before proceeding with it. God had called the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt and he used Moses to lead them out of Egypt.

The Israelites had spent about a year out of slavery in and around Mt. Sinai. One of the things which God had commanded Moses to do while they were at Mt. Sinai was to appoint his brother Aaron to be the high priest and spiritual leader of the people. The Lord also commanded Moses to use their fellow tribesmen, the men of Levi, to serve as helpers and aides to the priests. The people left Mt. Sinai, after God finished commanding all of these things to Moses, in order to go to the promised land.

When they got to the promised land they sent 12 spies to investigate it, but 10 of the spies didn't believe the Lord would allow the Israelites to conquer the promised land and they convinced the people not to enter it. God became angry with the people and sentenced them to wander in the desert for 40 years because they doubted his promise and rebelled against it. Our lesson for today occurs after the Lord had sentenced the people to wander in the desert.

Earlier in chapter 16 we hear how people became unhappy with Moses and Aaron. "Korah son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, and certain Reubenites--Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab, and On son of Peleth--became insolent and rose up against Moses. With them were 250 Israelite men, well-known community leaders who had been appointed members of the council. They came as a group to oppose Moses and Aaron and said to them, 'You have gone too far!'"

"The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the LORD is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the LORD's assembly?" These leaders were jealous of Moses and Aaron. They accused them of wrongfully seizing leadership over the assembly and they blamed Moses and Aaron for the wandering in the desert which they were forced to endure. These unhappy leaders began a rebellion against Moses and Aaron which rallied 250 community leaders to its side.

What was Moses reaction? "When Moses heard this, he fell facedown. Then he said to Korah and all his followers: 'In the morning the LORD will show who belongs to him and who is holy, and he will have that

person come near him. The man he chooses he will cause to come near him. You, Korah, and all your followers are to do this: Take censers and tomorrow put fire and incense in them before the LORD. The man the LORD chooses will be the one who is holy.”

This is where our lesson begins. The great confrontation is underway and the 250 leaders are standing before the Lord, but the Lord is not happy it has come to this because these leaders are going directly against the authority he chose to put over them and now he is going to deal with their rebellious attitude. He instructs Moses, “Say to the assembly, ‘Move away from the tents of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.’”

“Moses got up and went to Dathan and Abiram, and the elders of Israel followed him. He warned the assembly, ‘Move back from the tents of these wicked men! Do not touch anything belonging to them, or you will be swept away because of all their sins.’” What did the Lord have in mind? “Moses said, ‘This is how you will know that the LORD has sent me to do all these things and that it was not my idea:

If these men die a natural death and experience only what usually happens to men, then the LORD has not sent me. But if the LORD brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the grave, then you will know that these men have treated the LORD with contempt.’” The Lord was going to show the entire assembly these people’s rebellion wasn’t rebellion against Moses. It was rebellion against him.

“As soon as he finished saying all this, the ground under them split apart and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them, with their households and all Korah's men and all their possessions. And fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men who were offering the incense.” God crushed the forces who opposed Moses and Aaron because he had chosen Moses and Aaron to be the leaders of his people and rebelling against them was a direct challenge to God’s authority.

But does part of you wonder if God is really being fair? Why would he kill off parts of three families? Why would he put 250 leaders to death? Isn’t he being rather harsh? This brings me back to my introduction. My earlier examples of both a child’s whining about doing chores or a motorists complaining about a speeding ticket might bring a smile or two at first, but God hates these rebellious attitudes which go unchecked because a rebellious attitude gives Satan a foothold in our hearts.

Why does God hate it so much? Because rebellion against any authority, yes even complaining about parents or the police, is direct rebellion against him because he has given us authority to keep us safe. Our rebellion says to God we aren’t thankful for the gifts of authority and protection he has given us. This is why he dealt so harshly with Korah, Dathan and Abiram. But what happens when our rebellious hearts are confronted and crushed?

We can look at how the Lord responded to the actions of the rebellious people. “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Tell Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest, to take the censers out of the smoldering remains and scatter the coals some distance away, for the censers are holy--the censers of the men who sinned at the cost of their lives. Hammer the censers into sheets to overlay the altar, for they were presented before the LORD and have become holy. Let them be a sign to the Israelites.’”

“So Eleazar the priest collected the bronze censers brought by those who had been burned up, and he had them hammered out to overlay the altar, as the LORD directed him through Moses. This was to remind the Israelites that no one except a descendant of Aaron should come to burn incense before the LORD, or he would become like Korah and his followers.” God used the bronze from the censers for symbolism which would not be lost on the Israelites.

The bronze reminded them that only God’s chosen representatives, the priests, could speak to God on their behalf. It reminded and pointed them to the fact they needed a mediator to help them approach God. These priests were indeed God’s chosen mediators, but they were limited because they were sinful just like the people. What was the point of the priests? They were a shadow of God’s ultimate mediator who would put himself between God and the people.

We also need this same mediator. We need someone who would put himself between God and us. We need someone who will change our rebellious hearts into hearts of love. We need someone who would pour his blood over our rebellious hearts and cover them with his love. We need God’s ultimate mediator Jesus. Jesus perfectly kept God’s law in our place. He obeyed his parents without fail. He showed the governing authorities absolute and spotless respect.

Why did he do this? Jesus did it because he knew how difficult of a time we would have listening to authority. He knew we would rebel against our parents. He knew we would challenge and disobey the authority God has placed over us. He knew we needed his love to help us, encourage us and empower us to live lives which respected and appreciated God’s authority which he has placed over us. He did it all for us.

What can we learn from the rebellion of Korah, Dathan and Abiram? We can learn God hates rebellion against authority which he has put over us and he will punish those who continue to rebel against him by showing disregard for his authority and if they don’t stop he will send them to hell. But we can also learn about his love which sent his own son into the world to cover over our rebellious hearts and enables us to live at peace with him. Amen.