

“All God’s People”
May 24, 2026

Numbers 11:24-30
Acts 2:1-21

On Pentecost, we turn our attention to the church. And so, I ask: What kind of people do we need in a congregation?

Some answers might come to mind quickly:

We need people who serve by leading: Deacons who will care for the spiritual life of a congregation, including this important hour each week. Trustees who are wise stewards of our property and finances. People of vision who can look ahead and prepare to meet new challenges.

We need those who lead by serving: those who visit the sick, feed the hungry, shelter the homeless.

A congregation needs teachers and students, people who clean and repair, musicians and singers, people who give generously. A church needs people who think clearly, feel deeply, act decisively.

I once read a minister who said that he would rather have a retired person with a pickup truck join his congregation than a millionaire—you know, more important work could get done, he thought.

I don’t want to slight the millionaires—or the owners of pickup trucks—but personally, with my sabbatical time approaching, I’m especially glad when retired ministers join this congregation! I like it when my list of potential guest preachers grows! And we have some great preachers lined up for next month.

You might say that a congregation needs all kinds of people, with all kinds of abilities.

And you'd be right.

Moses, however, seems to have a different idea about the makeup of a religious community. He says to Joshua, his assistant: “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets...”

Moses, of course, is tired. Not long after Moses leads the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt, they begin to complain. They are no longer toiling under the oppression of Pharaoh, but life is still hard on the other side of the Red Sea, in the wilderness. The expectations of the people aren’t being met. Doubting Moses, they fear they will die in the desert wilderness. Ignoring God’s care for them, they grumble all the more.

The people are angry at God. God is angry at the people. And Moses—scripture tells us—Moses is displeased. He speaks forthrightly to God: “Why have you treated your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in your sight, that you lay the burden of all the people on me?” This is not what he signed up for.

Moses is a burned-out leader. He comes before God. “I am not able to carry all this people alone, for they are too heavy for me,” he cries. Then he states his bottom line: “If this is the way you are

going to treat me, put me to death at once . . .and do not let me see my misery.”

Leaders of any organization might, at times, know how Moses feels. Just kill me now.

The solitary leader carries a heavy burden—which is why in the United Church of Christ we share ministry among clergy and laity. We have learned at least a few things from our spiritual ancestors.

Moses is burned out. And God responds by telling Moses to gather seventy elders to help bear the burden of the people so that the whole enterprise is not dependent on Moses alone. When Moses assembles the elders, the Spirit of God comes upon them, empowering them for their work. The Spirit of God comes upon them and they prophesy. This includes speaking and also, wild, ecstatic dancing.

The Spirit of God works through organization and structure.

But the Spirit of God also works through dance—and surprise.

Here’s what happens when the Spirit of God comes upon people: Two men remain in the camp, Eldad and Medad. One Bible scholar wonders, as you might, if these are real names or just added for comic effect. Eldad and Medad are not part of the seventy elders that Moses assembled. They were stragglers, dawdlers, the left-behind.

Yet—and listen, for here is the surprise—they too receive the Spirit of God and prophesy.

And this is no laughing matter for Joshua.

Joshua has his standards, after all. You know the type. He wants to draw some pretty clear lines to distinguish who’s in and who’s out, who’s acceptable and who isn’t. Joshua will have nothing to do with the Spirit of God descending on just anyone, anywhere. He runs to Moses. He pleads: “Make these guys stop. They’re not like us and yet they are prophesying.”

Moses sees things differently. He responds: “Would that all the LORD’S people were prophets, and the LORD would put God’s spirit on them!” Maybe we’re not called to draw the lines as sharply as we might want. Maybe the stranger is more one of us than we would like to admit. Memory—biblical memory—tells about outcasts who are brought inside, tells about the Spirit of God coming to unexpected people at unexpected times.

Would that all the LORD’S people were prophets!

So, I ask you: What do you think of when you hear the word “prophet?”

Some think of prophecy as telling the future. Every now and then while I’m standing in line at Hy-Vee, I get a chance to see what Nostradamus has “prophesied.” He seems to have predicted everything. Some would turn the prophets of the Bible into ancient forecasters who long ago saw what would happen in our time.

Others regard prophets as social critics. We remember the Hebrew prophets who spoke against corrupt leaders and called for justice. We speak of social reformers as “modern day prophets.” And maybe with that, we’re getting a little closer to the meaning of that word.

Still others might think of prophets as irrelevant characters from the ancient past—raving lunatics with unkempt hair, dressed in burlap tunics.

But in spite of their sometimes strange appearance, in spite of their cries for justice, in spite of the fact that sometimes they seem to know what’s really happening long before anyone else—the main purpose of a prophet is to call the people of God back to the events that made them God's people.

A prophet reminds people of the acts of God central to their lives.

A prophet reminds the Hebrew people of God’s favor shown in the covenant with Abraham and Sarah.

A prophet reminds the Hebrew people of God’s love shown in delivering them from bondage in Egypt.

And a prophet calls on the people to live in that favor and love, to have lives that are shaped by what God has done and is doing.

So, too, the words of a prophet might remind *us* of the death and resurrection of Jesus as central to who we are as individuals and as a church. A prophet might call us to live as signs that God’s realm is breaking into the world. A prophet might call us to love one another as we have been loved.

What do prophets do? Primarily, they remind us of the mighty acts of God that have made us who we are.

If all the Lord's people were prophets we might live as people with a memory.

It's easy to forget about what God has done.

The Hebrew people complained all the way from Egypt to the Promised Land. No meat, no bread, no water. Poisonous scorpions, hostile people. It's easy to forget the favor and love of God.

You know that too.

Family life, work, even our leisure activities press in on each one of us. Going to school, earning money, doing works of compassion all claim priority status. Sometimes even the poison of vengeance, self-righteousness, and resentment demand our time.

Do you have a hard time figuring out what's important and what is merely urgent?

It's easy to forget what God has done.

But if all the Lord's people were prophets—

We would have people to remind us.

We would have people to remind us that God delivers us from our bondage to hatred and bitterness; God brings us safely through deep and troubled waters.

We would have people to remind us that God brings new life to us when we have given up everything as lost.

We would have people to remind us that God calls us each by name, out of loneliness into a community of love and hope.

We would have people to remind us that God does call individuals and communities and nations to justice and right relationships, calls us to welcome strangers and feed the hungry and establish new ways that bring peace.

If all the Lord's people were prophets—

We could respond to God's faithfulness to us with our own faithfulness.

We could respond to God's giving to us with our giving.

If all the Lord's people were prophets—who knows? We might even begin to change this world, bringing healing to broken places, feeding hungry bodies and hungry hearts, bridging the chasm caused by racial hatred, showing that we were made for life, not death.

Moses—and we—might wish that all God's people were prophets, because our world and we would be different.

And here's the thing: This is just what God is doing—making us “prophets.”

“The Spirit blows where it will,” Jesus says. It blows upon the elders that Moses set apart and it blows on Eldad and Medad, too. The Spirit intrudes upon order and it intrudes upon chaos. It blows inside and outside the church.

The Spirit of God is not a new thing. For centuries the Hebrew people sensed it in their leaders and prophets. What is new at Pentecost is that the Spirit of God is given to those on the outside—to the followers of Jesus, the one who had been rejected, tortured, and killed by those in power.

On Pentecost, Peter stands up and by the power of the Holy Spirit speaks to the crowd. “We're not drunk,” he says. Remember what you have heard. Remember the words of the prophet Joel: “God declares: I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy . . . Even upon my servants, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.”

Young and old, women and men. The Spirit of God comes upon the most unlikely people. Eldad. Medad. You. Me. We—each of us, all of us—are given the power to remember and proclaim the great love of God and to live according to that love.

The Spirit of God comes to us as a gift. The Spirit comes so that we in the church can announce the good news of Christ's resurrection to a hurting and dying world—which really is the news that people long to hear. Each of us speaks, not as the final authority, but as one voice among many trying to tell of God's presence in the world today.

God makes all of us prophets—people who remember our beginnings in Jesus Christ. Each person here is someone with dreams and visions, able by the grace of God, to tell the world about them. Speak from those dreams. Listen to the visions of one another. Remember where we came from as we look to the future.

You. Me. The person next to you, the person behind you, the person in front of you. Those who aren't here. Everyone is needed in the church, with all the differing gifts that we bring.

But would that all the Lord's people were prophets.

We are.

We are.

Let us live as such.