
Sermon: "The Least, the Lost and the Lonely"

I Samuel 16:1-13

In our afternoon Bible studies, we are reading straight through the book of Samuel. First Samuel and Second Samuel were once one book or one scroll. The main character throughout the book of Samuel is David, Israel's second and greatest King.

He starts out as a little and very young shepherd boy. The Story of the choosing of David as the King is God's doing through his prophet Samuel and it represents one of the most familiar and favorite of the Old Testament stories. You know how the story goes. Samuel is sent to Bethlehem to find the farmer Jesse to select from among Jesse's sons a new king for Israel because the sitting King of Israel, Saul, has lost God's favor. So, one after the other, the sons of Jesse are paraded before Samuel. And one after the other, they are rejected by the Lord. Finally, the youngest of the sons, David, is brought forward—almost as an afterthought. "This is the one," the Lord whispers in Samuel's ear. Samuel immediately anoints David as king in the presence of his brothers, and "the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David." For God sees what we cannot see. God sees into the heart and soul of each of us and calls us according to God's own purposes and rarely according to our own, or to the purposes of those who are acting as the movers, shakers and deciders of our world.

I've been with this Tuesday afternoon Bible study from the very moment I came here 3 years and 6 months ago. We've worked our way through the entire books of Genesis, Exodus, Ruth, Acts, Romans, and now the two books of Samuel. And we've begun to notice a pattern in many of the stories in our Bible. In both the Hebrew scriptures as well as the New Testament.

And the pattern is this: "The last shall be first and the first shall be last." From Cain and Abel all the way to the Gospel story of the Prodigal Son, it is the last born child who finds favor with his father and not the first born as it surely should have been, especially in a society like the one our Bible is lived out of. This was, after all, a land in which the laws of primogeniture, or the laws regarding the first born, were rigid and uncompromising. The first born son inherited the entire estate of his father and if the oldest son was in a good mood at the time of the reading of the last will and testament, maybe the younger sons might get some cast-offs. But what we noticed in our Bible study is that again and again, the stories we love to tell, violate this law of primogeniture in favor of the last, the least, the lost and the lonely.

God seems to have this preference for those who are the last. The last, the least, the lost and the lonely are invited to the head of the table where everyone gets served first and they get to be first in line for seconds. The privileged, the pretty, the well-dressed, and the well-heeled have their own resources. They don't need God to intercede for them at least in matters of food, shekels and shelter. They, as we say, "have got it made."

In fact, there seems to be a Biblical grudge against the wealthy. As a wealthy person myself, I find this pretty embarrassing actually.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, says what the Lord God will do when he comes, "The hungry will be filled with good things and the rich will be sent away empty." And in one of my favorite sentences

from Mary's Magnificat, "He will scatter the proud in the imaginations of their hearts."

The poor widow who gave a tiny amount of money is pointed to by Jesus as an example of real generosity, because she gave a little, but it was out of her own great need.

The Prodigal Son, after all his prodigious waste on wine, women and song, comes home to a great and undeserved feast while his older brother is left out in the field without even an invitation.

Jesus tells a difficult parable about those who work in the vineyard, some start at the first light of day, some start after the heat of the noon day sun and some start their work an hour before closing and they all get paid the same. What a dumb way to run a vineyard!

And God chooses David. What was God thinking? Even Samuel, God's most loyal servant seemed to be caught off guard by the choice. David is not the tallest. He is not the oldest. He is inexperienced and he is engaged in a line of work that is most despised by the "proud in the imagination of their hearts."

God seems to have this odd fondness for those of low estate. Samuel is shocked by the choice. So is David's own father, Jesse, who is, by the way, the grandson of Ruth, a Moabite woman, which adds yet another level of ethnic strangeness to this story—David is to be the king of the Jews, but he is actually of mixed racial heritage. What a mess!

What a mess in a world in which it is made clear by Deuteronomic law which states that Moabites "shall not enter the assembly of the Lord..." (Deuteronomy 23:3), much less be in the lineage of Israel's king.

It just seems like all the "regulations" about life are being overturned in this simple story of the anointing of David to be king of Israel.

Well, but there's another problem. A serious problem. The first King of Israel, Saul, is still alive. And deeply paranoid about losing his right to the throne. This will be part of the on-going narrative of the story in the book of Samuel. David is going to be king whether Saul likes it or not. And this story is the first to see David as the new king whether David likes it or not.

This story of the selection of David, while very old, is really a modern story isn't it? It is a story of outward appearances and inward qualifications.

And God favors inward and soulful things that most of us cannot see, even in ourselves.

We are such an outward focused society. We live in a society in which physical beauty counts for way too much, and things like loyalty and promise making and promise keeping count for way too little. Outward manifestations of wealth count for way too much and quiet and private acts of generosity count for way too little.

The Gospel lesson for this morning tells a similar tale. It's about a man blind from birth. In the days when this story was told, no one would have to explain that a man who was born blind would have to beg for the rest of his life. He would be destitute for the rest of his life. He would not marry because he couldn't earn a living. He would not have children or grandchildren because he

couldn't earn a living. He would have no permanent home because he couldn't earn a living. He was a beggar, pure and simple.

That has to be explained to a modern reader because our world is a bit more generous to people who are born blind. Not as generous as we ought to be, I suppose, but far more generous than in Jesus' day.

A man born blind was destined for destitution.

And what Jesus does for this man is amazing. The folks who knew him said, "Isn't this Freddy who used to beg on the corner of Clinton and South?" Some said that he was that man. Others said that he just looked like that man. But Freddy kept saying, "I am that man!!!!"

They bring him to the Pharisees who were the lawyers of Jesus' day and they found a technicality. Jesus healed on the Sabbath. "Hah! He can't be a man of God by definition because he didn't obey God's law to sit back and take a load off for a day. Instead, this work-a-holic, this heal-a-holic decided to heal this man born blind. Couldn't he have waited until the Sabbath was over? No! He's gotta do this on this holy day." And on and on like that.

When you can't fault a man for doing the right thing, maybe you can charge him with a technicality. "Healing on the Sabbath. That'll be \$140 dollars. Your court appearance will be on March 23."

Jesus reaches deeply into the human heart to find the hurt and the beauty there which is hidden from the rest of the world. He finds value in the unvaluable. He finds hope in the hopeless. He finds love in the unlovely. And he reorients all of our lives toward that which is truly valuable.

I gotta tell you about last Sunday.

I was schmoozing as I always do at coffee hours. I go from table to table catching up on family news. And at some point, I stood behind Grace. Grace is 9 years old and has Downs syndrome. And, typical of Downs syndrome kids, she completely took charge of the situation and pulled my ear down to her mouth and said as if there was no one else in the room, "I love you."

I didn't ask for this Grace moment. I did nothing to deserve this Grace moment. I was the undeserving recipient of this Grace moment. Grace in Jesus' time would certainly have been among the last, the least, the lost and the lonely. I can't even imagine, nor do I want to imagine, what the ancient Jewish society would have done with a child like Grace. I won't let my mind or my heart go there.

It was, just marvelously, a moment of Grace. It was a moment that Jesus talked about. In God's economy, the really important people are what the world calls the "last, the least, the lost and the lonely."

And they will sit forever at the head of the table. David the young shepherd boy, the man blind from birth and Gracie.

They will be served first and the rest of us will all get the leftovers. And, ya know what?

You know what?

In the great economy of God, there will be more than enough left over.

Amen.