

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville, LA
17 June 2018

I Samuel 15:34-16:13

Thursday, June 17th, 1993 was a sunny, but cool day in New Jersey. Bill Clinton was president, and most of us still liked him. There were no major international conflicts, other than a civil war in Rwanda, which would not develop into a major genocide until the following year. The number one song in America was ***That's the Way Love Goes*** by Janet Jackson and in the UK, UB40 was at top with ***I Can't Help Falling in Love with You***. New Jersey's Governor was James Florio, a fairly inept governor who was defeated that November by Christie Todd Whitman. The Mayor of Paterson was Bill Pascrel, who later went on to become a Congressman and remains in Congress even today. I was a young Social Worker working in a Runaway Shelter in Paterson and I was on break from Rutgers University, where I had started a Master's degree in Social Work about a year before. The most remarkable thing about this Thursday, 25 years ago today, was that at 11:00am, in the presence of my parents and two witnesses I had to bribe to be there, I married my beautiful wife. Now, you may want to know what the readings today have to do with this self-serving story. The answer is, absolutely nothing! I just wanted to share. Actually, they have a lot to do with our anniversary and I will show you how in a minute. In the mean time, let us get to the readings.

The readings today talk about a God who makes the impossible possible. Today celebrate the God who chooses the underdog to advance his plans for humanity one more stage towards their completion. This is a God who will use a young boy of perhaps no more than 13 to become the greatest king of Israel and the ancestor of our Lord, Jesus. This is both marvelous and comforting at the same time. The OT reading today starts by saying that the Lord has removed his favor from King Saul and that for this reason Samuel is grieving. You may recall that it was Samuel who anointed Saul as the first king of Israel. Saul was a good man who was counted as belonging to the company of the prophets. There are indications that he was a good king towards the beginning of his reign. But, soon, Saul forgot where his power came from. He fooled himself into thinking that his power derived from his cleverness, his intelligence, and his military prowess. Soon he began to behave in ways contrary to the great traditions of his nation and their God. He became arrogant, disobedient, and proud. He began to think that life in Israel was all about him and his personal desires. He became so offensive to God that God rejected him as the king of Israel. So, as Samuel grieves for Saul, as perhaps many of us grieve over politicians who squander their talent and begin to behave as demigods, God speaks to him and directs him to Bethlehem, to the house of Jesse.

The passage tells us that when Samuel arrived at the city, the elders come to him at the gate and asked him if he came peaceably. In fact, it tells us that they were shaking in their boots, they were terrified. You may be wondering why they are so afraid of Samuel? We know that Samuel was a judge over Israel in addition to being a prophet. Before Israel had kings it had judges and Samuel was one of the best judges the nation had. He was a great defender of the nation, a powerful leader, and a great

warrior. Perhaps when the people see him and those who came with him, they fear that he was coming to attack the city, to incite civil war, or to pillage the area. Bands of armed men would on occasion enter unprotected towns to pillage. So, the elders were concerned for a good reason. Samuel's disapproval of Saul was well known and they feared that the prophet is mounting a civil war against the king.

Samuel's response is that he is coming to offer sacrifice to the Lord in the city. In fact, he invites the elders to "purify" or to "sanctify" themselves and come to the sacrifice. The expressions "purify" and "sanctify" here mean nothing else than wash-up, take a bath, get dressed in Sunday's best, etc. It is dishonorable to come to the sacrifice wearing work clothes or without proper bathing. We have all indication that the elders and many others attended this sacrifice, including Jesse and his sons.

After the sacrifice, during the banquet, we are told that Jesse's sons passed by Samuel who thinks he has found Israel's new king. Eliab is tall and strong. Certainly he would make a most suitable king. God, however speaks to Samuel and tells him, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the Heart". The same scene is repeated with all of the other sons of Jesse, until Samuel asks for David to be brought in from the fields, where he was tending the sheep. We are told that when Samuel saw David, he was directed by the Lord to anoint him and to make him king. Then, as soon as he was anointed, the Spirit of God came upon David in a mighty way, not just on that day, but from that day forward. Once again, God has chosen the most unlikely of the bunch to accomplish his mission on earth. And this is where I resume the story of my wedding day. I am more convinced now than ever before that my beautiful wife looked beyond physical appearance into my heart when she chose to marry me. Trust me, I was nothing to look at. I am sure that at some point she asked herself, "Can I domesticate this beast?" This question was followed by, "Is this the man I want my children to spend the weekends with?" Once she was able to answer these questions, she took a risk. That was a "Oh, what the heck!" move, meant to punish her family! 25 years later, I believe her risk paid off. She found herself a free dish-washer and a cook! Not bad at all!

Anyway, back to Scripture. God did not start the pattern of choosing "the least likely to succeed" or the "lowly" with David. Remember that it was Abel's sacrifice that was acceptable to the Lord, even though Cain's was a more impressive sacrifice. God chooses Jacob even though Essau was the eldest and was more powerful than Jacob. Samuel himself was just a little boy when the Lord spoke to him and made him a prophet over Israel. Later on, God will choose a young girl to be the mother of the Savior, even though, I am sure, there were many women of standing who would have been the logical choice. God himself gives us the reason for his strange way of choosing his prophets and kings. He says. "I don't see as you see. You see the exterior, but I see the interior. You are very concerned with appearances, but I am concerned with the heart. You revere status, power, fame, and the obvious marks of leadership, but I look into people's hearts. I humble the mighty and lift-up those for whom society doesn't seem to have any use. My ways are not your ways"

My friends, I find this passage very comforting. If God can use just a child like David and even Samuel, then perhaps God has a particular plan for you and for I. Even though we are sinners in need of constant redemption. Even though sometimes our minds wander and our resolve is weakened by all the temptations of this world. Even though sometimes our walk of faith feels more like a crawl than a walk. Even if at times we are selfish and self-centered. God has a plan for each of us because he doesn't see as mortals see and his love for us is not dependent on wealth, fame, or even intelligence. And for this, I am deeply grateful.

There is a condition, however, for those who want to be used by God. We see this requirement in the Gospel form Mark today. Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God by using the metaphor of a mustard seed. The mustard seed is a very small seed, yet, when it is planted it can grow to become a great bush. In order for the mustard seed or an oak seedling to grow into one of these amazing oak trees around the cemetery, it must first die. The seed must be buried and it must die. It is only then that it becomes transformed and begins to develop.

If we want to grow as mighty oaks, we too must die to ourselves. We must begin to see life the way God sees life. We must die to our tendency to differentiate between people, ascribing value to some and not to others, treating some one way and others in another, less humane way. We too must die to our self-centered ways. This is the irony of Christianity. Whereas everything in our culture is designed to build the self through self-psychology, self-improvement, the development of self-esteem, and the acquisition of self-awareness the Christian message is that we need less of our "self." In fact, we need to empty ourselves of "self" so that we may be filled by the Holy Spirit with God's blessings. Jesus says that in fact we must die to our self. We must be born again if we want to inherit the Kingdom of God, as Jesus tells Nicodemus.

God can use us as he used the young boy David, and if we allow ourselves to die, God will fill us with his amazing power. This power will allow us to grow into great oaks in his church. I pray today that we will let the Holy Spirit lead us into the type of death described in the Gospel today, so that we may rise with Christ to a life filled with the joy and the hope that only Christ can bring into our lives. Amen!