

Can We Trust in Abundance?

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Gieseeman

Pentecost 3

June 9-10, 2018

1 Samuel 8:4-11, 16-20

Kennedy's assassination. Fifty years is a long time. I remember that day; I heard the news as I was boarding a bus for the eighth grade field trip to St. Louis. We still had fun, as kids can do. But there was a heaviness—a reality that, at fourteen, I couldn't ignore. It was becoming too obvious that the world was a dangerous place and that being a leader was risky.

Just two months before this, on April 4, Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed. I remember hearing this on the news while I was babysitting little boys down the street. (Unknowingly preparing for my future life!)

Less than five years before this, as we know, President John Kennedy was assassinated. Through these years and beyond, the Vietnam War divided the country, snuffed out young lives, and left wounds that would never heal in bodies, psyches, and souls. My husband Ed's cousin, John, fought in Vietnam. He survived but never recovered.

National and international conflict, chaos, dissension, and division are not new.

We continue this weekend in our semi-continuous readings from the Hebrew Bible. A lot has happened since last week with the call of young and eager Samuel. This week, as we have heard in today's Scripture reading, Samuel, the beloved leader and follower of God's ways is old. It's time to retire, step aside, and hand over the reins. But his sons, like Eli's, were too corrupt to inherit his office.

Who will provide leadership in shaky times?

The elders made a bold and unexpected request. They wanted to be like other nations. They wanted a king. This was a radical departure, an alarming statement. It marked an abandonment of Israel's relationship with God and of who they were as people of the covenant.

They were *not* to be like other nations. Instead, the covenant called them to trust in God's abundance and desire for wellbeing for all people; to care for the widow, orphan, and alien; to welcome the stranger, leave a corner of their field, to tithe their harvest in order to share.

The covenant gave them freedom and Sabbath, a rest from work, a weekly reminder that they were not slaves in Egypt.

The covenant connected the people to the Gifts of God.

But the people were distracted and afraid. The bully nations around them were breathing down their necks. Trusting God's generosity and welcoming seemed too risky.

Samuel warned the elders that they were making a big mistake! The cost for their choice would be high. "The monarchy will *take* from you! And the list is long ... the king will take, take, take. Your sons and your daughters, your belongings and properties. You will be oppressed and taxed. You will be again like slaves in Egypt!"

"Instead of crying out because of enemies, the people will cry out because of their king!" [1] (I hear this kind of crying today.)

But the people had their minds made up. Sadly, Samuel and the LORD stepped aside, leaving Israel with a lingering question: Is it possible to trust in God's promises, to participate in God's dream that public power need not be for taking but for sharing and giving? [2]

Still, our choices have consequences.

The people long ago were dissatisfied. And often, so are we. Some say the root cause of human suffering is dissatisfaction. No matter how rich or secure or successful a person may be a fundamental dissatisfaction persists. There is a nagging sense that life is somehow not all that it could be or should be. [3]

It can be difficult to completely outgrow normal adolescent expressions of dissatisfaction, no matter how old we get: like...

Not being knowledgeable enough ...

"I'm out of it!"

Not being successful enough ...

"I'm a loser!"

Not being popular enough ...

"I'm never invited"

Not being sociable enough ...

"I never know what to say."

Not being happy enough ...

"I have nothing but problems." [4]

Dissatisfaction is as old as the hills. The proverb "The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence" comes from an American song written in 1924:

The grass is always greener in the other fellow's yard.
The little row We have to hoe, Oh boy that's hard
But if we all could wear Green glasses now,
It wouldn't be so hard To see how green the grass is
In our own back yard. [5]

This proverb has similar sisters in many countries and comes in many languages.

Dissatisfaction distracts us, and distraction is dangerous.

Fifty years have passed since the shaky deadly events of 1968. The world is still dangerous and leadership is still risky. And still we experience the consequences of our leadership choices.

Yesterday a documentary about the life and work of Fred Rogers came out, "Won't You Be My Neighbor." One reviewer wrote that the film is less about Fred Rogers himself than the worldview he embodied. The documentary's main goal is to convince us that, while kindness and empathy are in short supply today, it need not be that way.

Fred Roger's television program began in tumultuous 1968. His slow, compassionate approach to children's television ran counter to what we would expect. In his neighborhood, Mr. Rogers saw children as important, his work as ministry and kindness as essential to human existence. His stories told children about their own worth, about feeling emotions and then learning to control them, about living harmony with other people.

Fred Rogers was Presbyterian minister, a songwriter, and a leader. He gently helped children figure out how to navigate scary, exciting, and confusing times, like dealing with bullies, experiencing parents' divorce, feeling uncertain about the future, and going through frightening world events.

We could all use such leadership!

One of the most subversive pieces of the story is that Fred Rogers is the same person he presented! He really was kind, gentle, insightful, and bold. There were no surprises other than this and a genuine invitation: "Won't you be my neighbor?"

Mr. Rogers wrote for children, but at times we all need help dealing with the inevitable dissatisfaction difficulties of life. Even when we are grown up.

We need Mr. Rogers's worldview! Kindness is not weakness. Speaking with care is what we do because we believe the person we're speaking to is a human being with worth and dignity. [6]

All people are children of God ... and are part of God's neighborhood!

So, to whom do we listen? Whom do we follow? These are important questions because there are consequences for our choices.

Can we trust in abundance? Or are we gripped by the fear of scarcity?

Recently, I read about Gordon Tredgold's leadership business model called the "abundance approach." The most effective leaders are happy to share with their teams.

Even centuries after Samuel, we are lured to thinking that the fastest way to accumulate things is to take, take, take. You have to fight for your share, because if you don't get it, someone else will!

Tredgold proposes that this is the way bad leaders operate. They believe there isn't enough to go around, so they spend all their energy trying to get everything they can. They fight for money, praise, and position and do everything they can to get it all.

We will find out as the story unfolds, this is how Israel's kings will lead. They will take, take, take ... as Samuel had warned.

But the covenant abundance approach is to share, share, share. Be mindful, connect to others, be generous, with attention.

Share what you know and have learned

Share your time. Be generous.

People of all ages are of value

Share work and responsibilities. And delegate. Other people can contribute. [7]

Our life together in the church is one that calls us to be people of the covenant to live like this.

To trust in leadership that reflects God's desire for neighborliness.

To work together for the common good

To not withdraw from public questions related to security, safety; mutuality and meaning; health and well-being; work and wealth.

The elders of Israel were distracted from the God of abundance.

We gather together as the church to focus our vision on the promises of the ONE who gives life to the whole neighborhood.

As people of God in this place, we step up and speak out to provide leadership in shakier times.

The consequence for this choice is the benefit of the common good.

Amen.

Resources:

[1] *The Jewish Study Bible*

[2] Brueggemann, Walter, *1 & 2 Samuel*, page 68

[3] Welb, Michael, *The Root Cause of Dissatisfaction*

"The Root Cause of human Suffering" Michael Welb

[4] Pickardt, Carl E., "Adolescence and Self-dissatisfaction," *Psychology Today*.

[5] Egan, Raymond B., and Richard A. Whiting. "The Grass Is Always Greener"

[6] Wilkinson, Alissa. "Morgan Neville on making a movie about Fred Rogers's 'radical kindness'." Vox.com, June 20, 2018

[7] Tredgold, Gordon. "Why Good Leaders Look to Share," inc.com, February 21, 2018.

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