

The Story of Steadfast Love

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman

July 21-22, 2018

Pentecost 9

2 Samuel 7:1-14 through to 17

For breakfast many mornings I slice mushrooms and sauté them with baby spinach before I add either egg whites, or an egg. For me this is a *great* breakfast. This past week I noticed listed on the side of the mushroom carton about a dozen “great ways” to utilize these mushrooms. As I read them through I agreed. They all sounded GREAT to me.

My mushroom, spinach, and egg white breakfast is not considered GREAT by everyone, including my husband, Ed. (Some of you may agree with him!)

What does it mean for something or for someone to be GREAT?

The word came from Old English and originally meant “big.” In time, it came to mean “amount considerably above normal.” It also is used to mean “prominent, eminent, distinguished and celebrated.” In everyday language we use it to mean “wonderful!”:

“I’ll meet you for lunch at noon.” Great!

“It’s great to hear that you are feeling better!”

This summer time, we have been reading of Samuel, Saul, and David. Through the stories, we have been reminded that the people wanted a king and that their choice will have consequences. David—the shepherd, slinger, and golden boy—is complicated. He used what he had to flatten the Philistine Goliath. He lamented the loss of mentor Saul and companion Jonathan. David was anointed King. In an ambiguous and ambitious effort, David moved the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, to gain legitimacy and approval. And, through it all, the LORD, blessed David.

This week we read from Chapter 7 of 2 Samuel, the verses called the “Oracle of Nathan.” Here, David is catching a breath. He is in his kingly house enjoying God given peace. And he wonders about it: “Here I am King of Israel living in a lovely place, in peace from enemies while the Ark of the Covenant is living in tent. I think I should build a temple!”

Nathan, the prophet, whom we will hear more from, gives the go ahead.

Even David’s desire to build a temple for the Ark of the Covenant is ambiguous: pious and political. If he thought he could nail down Holy Power, or possess it for himself, he

was wrong. After an overnight divine intervention, Nathan came back to the king and said, "On second thought, that's not going to work!"

As it turns out the Holy One, the LORD, Yahweh, has a better idea!

Instead, there is a role reversal. *God promised to build David a house that is an everlasting dynasty.*

I have been with you wherever you went ... I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth.... The LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house ... I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.—2 Samuel 7:9, 11, 14 (NRSV)

Davidic kings ruled in Jerusalem for more than four centuries, to the time of the exile. But the biblical writers concluded that God would keep the promise to David in the promise of a coming messiah. And Christians concluded that the promise of the messiah was fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Whose title, Christ, is the translation of the Hebrew word *messiah*.

The importance of this passage is hard to overstate. Walter Brueggemann judges this oracle to be the most crucial theological statement in the Old Testament. [1]

Here we have an unbreakable promise that God's *HESED*, steadfast love, will continue. Previously, the promises were given with requirement: If you do this or that, I will be with you. The "if" requirement ended with Saul. Now, instead of "if," we have *nevertheless*. There are no deal breakers! This is an astonishing promise!

These words from 2 Samuel are the real basis for messianic hope: There is one coming who will make things right. Later, the community around Jesus saw this text as a way to understand the reality of Jesus.

Moving forward, the community of God's people is identified by hope, a community that trusts in God's promise to right the world. This means the Creator cares about and works in history for the well-being of creation. And the promise will be kept within history through people, like us!

Well-being can be measured. Gallup-Sharecare Well-Being Index measures well-being through satisfaction in five areas: purpose, social (supportive relationships), financial security, community connections, and physical health.

The poll released in January 2018 that American's wellbeing declined in 2017, after increasing in 2015 and 2016. This was driven by worsening emotional health, social well-being, and purpose well-being. Minorities, women, low income Americans, and Democrats experienced the largest declines. [2]

A separate well-being poll of American states revealed that, in 2017, no state saw improvement from the prior year. Top states for well-being last year were North Dakota and Vermont. Hawaii was third. West Virginia and Louisiana were last. 21 states saw well-being drop last year, which is more than even the year 2009.

We consider our own well-being: our purpose, resources, community, and health. There are times, chapters in our lives when our purpose shifts; when providing care for persons close to us—children, spouses, parents—begin or ends. I can tell you that my life changed substantially a year and a half ago when we moved my mother here from Peoria. When we go away to school, start a new position or retire, the questions, “what am I here for?” and “what am I supposed to do now?” need new answers.

And, certainly, resources change in our lives. We work, and sometimes struggle, for financial stability, for being able to live without the burden of heavy debt, without being worried about having enough. Being part of a community that cares about us and encourages us to care makes life better. But sometimes we are busy. Being healthy, physically feeling well matters to all of us. But life, work, caring, habits, and aging can wear us down.

Like the people of Israel, we have our own tragedies and hardships, challenges and changes. There are times it is hard to be hopeful.

The Old Testament books of 1 and 2 Samuel were edited 400 years after David, following the worst time in Israel’s history. At that time, their well-being index would have been at an all-time low. But here is the remarkable thing: It is in this low time that the divine, unbreakable promise to work in history to make the world right is announced!

It is at the most terrible time that the people are called to be a community of hope!

The promises to David include us. The one who was “born in the city of David” came to show us what well-being looks like:

As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd, and he began to teach them many things.—Mark 6:34 (NRSV)

Jesus invited people to participate in a different kind of kingdom and greatness. One characterized by justice, peace, equity, and neighborliness.

In our lesson the LORD promised greatness to David and his ancestors. For many in David’s time, to be a great nation meant to be dominant in military power and in world economics. For a while, Israel was great in these ways.

But the Greatness that God gifted was *HESED*, steadfast love.

We are often caught between two kingdoms: the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God. What does it mean to be a great people of a great nation? We are citizens of both. The tensions between the two are real and, at times like we live in now, painful.

Saturday morning Ed and I attended a memorial service for a longtime pastor, mentor, and friend. Pastor Don Shanks was an ordained minister in the Brethren church. He died just before his 94th birthday. Don worked part-time as a chaplain at St. Joseph Hospital, and led support groups until shortly before his death. The Brethren are from the Anabaptist tradition; they reject war and violence. Don's pursuit of justice was tireless.

He marched in Selma and was present at the Mall in Washington D.C. when Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke, "I have a dream." In the iconic photo we can find Don's image. Don lived a long life of service, friendship, encouragement, and activism. He was non-violent, but not passive; humble and confident. His greatness was grounded on God's *HESED*, steadfast love, grace, the intended well-being for all. Don's greatness was that of a servant.

In many ways this was a challenging week, for our country, world, and our lives. How do we interpret reports of leaders? Whom do we trust? Lean on? Learn from? What kind of greatness do we long for as people and as a nation?

The Story of Steadfast Love, a promise given through David and through Jesus, encourages us to strive for greatness by working together for mutual well-being. For satisfaction with purpose, supportive relationships, financial stability, community connection, and physical health.

We can do this in history as people and as a nation!

In his book Faith: A Journey for All, 93-year-old former president Jimmy Carter writes about the attributes of a superpower. Or, what does it mean to be a great nation?

These might very well mirror those of a person. They would include a demonstrable commitment to truth, justice, peace, freedom, human rights, generosity and the upholding of other moral values. There is no inherent reason that our nation cannot be the international paragon of these virtues.

There would be no real sacrifice in exemplifying these traits. Whenever people in any nation face a challenge or a problem, it would be good to have them look to Washington for assistance or as a sterling example. Our own well-being would be enhanced by restoring the trust, admiration, and friendship that our nation formerly enjoyed among other peoples. Mutual honor, trust, and respect can exist even when interests are at odds.

The former president quoted Jürgen Moltmann, who wrote:

The dream of freedom, equality, and happiness for all human beings – is a human dream. It can only be fulfilled by humanity as a whole. As long as human beings are alienated from each other...as long as they live against each other and not for each other, this dream cannot be fulfilled. [3]

The ancient promise of greatness given to David is a promise of presence and love for this world. We join God's dreams as we work together for well-being in our lives and in the world. And in this is true greatness.

Amen.

REFLECTION:

- *Where do you see evidence of God's promise that HESED, steadfast love, will continue? In your life? In our world?*
- *How do you stay grounded in hope?*

Resources:

[1] Brueggemann, Walter. *1 & 2 Samuel*.

[2] <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/02/12/gallup-sharecare-study-well-being-worsened-in-nearly-half-of-states.html>

[3] Carter, Jimmy. *Faith: A Journey for All*, pages 163-165.

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