

Rev. Jerry Deck  
1 Samuel 16:1 - 13

November 9, 2014

## Roots The Teeny Weenie True King

I may have mentioned this before, but I think that when you're growing up one of the greatest things in the world is to get your sibling in trouble. It's just a rush! I thought of that again this week as we were driving around as a family. Our two oldest were in the very back and all of a sudden I heard, quite loudly, "Adelie, quit hitting me." I looked in the rearview mirror and, as I had suspected, Shaughnessy wasn't even looking at Adelie, but was instead staring at us up front and she yelled out. A couple of minutes later I hear, "Adelie, give me back my book" and sure enough Shaughnessy's not looking at her sister but at us, hoping desperately that we will "overhear" what she's saying.

In many ways, I think that's what I'm trying to do here this morning. Today is the day when we will ordain and install our new elders and deacons and so as I thought about this sermon I've really been thinking about them. And yet, as the sermon was coming together I realized, not surprisingly, that I'm not really just talking to them, but to you all as well. And so, what is important for us as leaders to hear in this story and what is important for all of us at ZPC to overhear as we look at this story?

Since we kind of jump right into this story it might be helpful to know where we are in the story. Saul has been king for a while now, however, he has not been following God. And so finally God is fed up with Saul's antics and has decided that a new king of Israel is in order. But Samuel is having a hard time of doing this, of thinking that this is what should be done, and so God begins by saying to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul?" In other words, "Sam, you gotta' move on my friend." But it isn't easy for Samuel to do this, and quite frankly, it's pretty understandable why this is so difficult.

Because Samuel was there at the beginning, who told Saul that he was going to be the king. He was the one who watched Saul grow into this role. He's laughed with Saul and wept with him. He knew Saul probably better than anyone else. His life and Saul's life were intertwined. When Saul did well people were happy with Samuel and when Saul was not doing well, not so much. There was an attachment, emotional, even spiritual one, that made it difficult for him to let go of the past.

And I think that's a good word for the leaders at ZPC. I think one of the most difficult parts of leading into the future are those things that hold us to the past. It may be a program that has done well in the past, but quite honestly is not effective any longer. However, because of the emotional attachment that the church has to the program, it's hard to let go of. It might be a particular person who used to do things just right and now there's a new person doing it and well, "It's okay, but it's not the way Susan used to do it". And that hinders us from moving forward. It may, quite honestly, just be a memory of the way things used to be and it's simply hard to live in the present (not to

mention the future) because of the memory that is so engrained in our heads. It can be lots of things, but what is important for our leaders is for you to be able to listen to the Spirit of God who might be saying, "How long will you grieve this program or person or memory." I have moved on and I'm wondering when you're going to catch up.

Of course (and I hope you're overhearing this congregation) there are times when leaders try to move forward and there are those in the congregation who will not be happy with you about it and, let's be honest, that's a challenge. In fact it brings us to the next part of the story. After God told him get over the past, get the oil and move forward, Samuel says, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And, of course, he is probably right. Saul tried to kill David and there's no reason to think that he wouldn't try to kill Samuel as well. It is a stark reminder to us that moving forward is not only a challenge, it's not only painful, but it is also dangerous. And one of the things that leaders of churches have to understand, just as Samuel had to learn, is that fear is simply a part of moving forward and that as you do so, you are going to make some people unhappy. Now I don't think that anyone is going to kill you for trying something new here at ZPC (!), but I do think that it's inevitable that not everyone is going to like it when you move forward by trying new things. And while we love them and care for them, we cannot allow fear to hold us back from going where God has called us to go.

All that said I do want to take a quick aside to say how impressed I have been in my time here with how open you all have been to trying new things. As a pastor and one of the leaders of this church, I can say that it is an amazing blessing to be a part of a church where the majority of folks are up for trying something new. When the Mission Commission and the session decided to try something new by opening up the Lodge to recovering addicts I was intrigued to see how the congregation would react and I have to tell you I was amazed and praise God for how supportive the congregation has been. So, elders and deacons, keep doing this, keep going out on a ledge. Yes, at some point the fears will come, but let us keep moving forward despite the danger.

And, despite the danger, Samuel does move forward. He enters Bethlehem and goes to the house of Jesse. By this point Samuel seems to have moved past the past. He has absorbed the fear and the danger and now he's ready to see what is next. He seems almost excited as he looks over this group of men, especially when he sees Eliab, Jesse's oldest. He comes to Eliab, someone who was handsome and of good height, someone who (not surprisingly) looked much like Saul when he was coronated. (A great reminder to us that even when we are ready for something new we still will be tempted to go with what we have known before rather than into the unknown future). God quickly tells Samuel that this is not the one, that Samuel cannot simply look at what is attractive, but must try and see as God sees. So he moves on to Abinadab and then Shammah and then one by one until all 7 of Jesse's sons have passed by. But nothing happens.

Now, let's think about this for a moment. Samuel is ready to move on. He is doing what God wanted him to do. He has risked his life. He's prepared with the oil and horn to move forward. And so, what *should* happen in this story? Well I think he should go all the way down the sons until the last one, number 7 is picked by God. Remember what

7 means. It means completion or fulfillment and yet, when Samuel reaches number 7 God says no. In other words, we can do everything right, we can put ourselves in that perfect position, we can be ready to try that perfect new program, we can finally move past the past and be ready to try working with new people and then after all that...nuthin'. You know what I call that? And that can cause confusion for us, can't it? I think we hear that in Samuel's question to Jesse.

"Um, are all your sons here?" Samuel's desperate, right? He doesn't know what's going on and my guess is he's feeling pretty foolish right about now. He's done all this work and yet he has no fruit to bear, no king to coronate. He's just left holding his oil and horn. And it doesn't get better too quickly either. Because Jesse says, "Well, there's one more, but he's all the way out keeping the sheep." And Samuel, probably somewhat desperately says, "Well bring him here because we're not going anywhere, heck we're not even sitting down, until he gets here." And then they wait. Can you imagine what an uncomfortable and awkward time that time of waiting was. What would the conversation be like? Uh, Mr. Samuel that's a cool horn you got there." "Hey, Eliab, you're pretty tall, do you play basketball?" "Um, Abinadab, so is that French or..."

My point is that just because you decide to move forward dangerously and just because you think you've developed the right program or have the right people, that it doesn't mean that all of a sudden everything is going to fall into place quickly. In the quick results kind of society in which we live, there are times when we will need to learn what it means to be patient, what it means to wait upon the Lord. As leaders especially we feel the need to see fruit, and yet just because we don't see fruit doesn't mean that God is not at work. There is a spiritual discipline, as Samuel learns, about waiting upon God and for God's timing.

And one of the reasons that's important is because so often the things that are deeply transformative, the things of the heart (which God looks at), are things which require patience and time and waiting upon the Lord. They may not be as eye catching, or attractive, but they lead to real, genuine change. And it's important for us as churches to realize that, while we may say that heart transformation is what is most important to us, like Samuel we are also easily drawn to what is most attractive. In fact, when we measure churches we so often measure them by what is easily seen on the outside, not on what is going on inside.

The easiest example of that, of course, is one we've talked about before which is our measuring a church by how big they are. Just like Samuel and Jesse's oldest son, Eliab, we think that if you are big then you must be the one God has chosen. And, if we're honest (though we may not say it out loud), almost all of us do it. Large churches have the Lord's blessing and small churches are clearly not being who God wants them to be. And because of that so many of the decisions that church leaders make end up being built around the idea of whether or not the program or service is attractive enough to help them get bigger rather than asking the question about whether or not the program or service is going to help transform people's hearts, is going to genuinely change people. Now let me be clear that doesn't mean that large churches are not

doing what God wants or that small churches are, by no means. But it does mean that if we take this text seriously as a church we need to be aware of how often we are aligned with Samuel.

That's one of the reasons why we think it's so important to focus on home groups. This is not something that we think is going to instantly multiply our church size nor do we think it is nearly as attractive as an exciting worship service. No, getting together weekly in someone's home where you are wrestling with scripture and opening yourself up to others can be, at times, difficult. It is nowhere nearly as easy or enjoyable as just coming to a one-hour service once a week. And yet, it seems to us that deep genuine change requires the patience and commitment that something like home groups gives.

That desire for deep, genuine change is also what must continue to propel us out into our community and our world, as servants of Christ. Doing what Jesus teaches us in Matthew, to clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the prisoners, will change not only those whom we are clothing, caring for and visiting, but will also change our own hearts. It's nearly impossible to not care for those in need and not be changed yourself. Of course, you may have noticed that it is not usually those things that most churches use to attract people to them. No our advertisements or websites usually show a picture of the good-looking preacher or the allure of lovely programs for your kids or promises to help you live your best life now. It is a rare church that will advertise by saying, "Come here and you'll get to be a part of the hospital team that visits people you don't probably know, get you in situations you don't want to be in, thinking about things like sickness and death that you probably don't want to think about." And yet, so often it is that practice of our faith, and not the good looking preacher or promise of a better life that will actually change who you are into a person that more resembles Christ. My point, elders and deacons, is to encourage you to focus on what will allow us as a congregation to grow in ways that may not always look attractive on the outside, but that are changing us into a people who look more like God each and every day. Ways that allow us to more fully love God and love neighbor.

Now let me end by being very clear. This doesn't mean that we are trying to be unattractive, doing everything we can to repel people. It's fascinating that even though God rebukes Samuel for looking only at what is attractive on the outside, we are also told quite matter-of-factly that David is a handsome fella. I do believe that a congregation who is not stuck in the past, who is able to move forward in courage, who is not afraid to be patient and wait upon the Lord and who is committed to the slow and arduous work of things like home groups and serving our neighbors will, over time, be attractive to a people who are looking for beauty that is deep and meaningful. But we begin not with simply trying to attract people, but with becoming a people whose hearts and lives are so transformed that the Christ that is within us will not be able to help but attract those who are in need of experiencing the beauty of the gospel.

Thank you, elders and deacons, for answering this call and may God work through you for his glory and for his glory alone. Amen.

