Facing Giants

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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1 Samuel 17:45-50

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Researchers at Bowling Green State University conducted a simple experiment. They described a scenario in which two teams, A and B, met in a seven-game playoff. Team A is highly-favored and Team B is considered the underdog. The researchers asked hundreds of students which team they would rather root for. Eighty-one percent chose Team B—the underdog.

This phenomenon is called the “underdog effect.” Everybody loves an underdog: Rocky Balboa, Harry Truman, the 1980 US Olympic hockey team and orphan Harry Potter come immediately to mind.

Why do we root for the underdog? We identify with the underdog. We are the underdog. We are David in a world full of Goliaths.

Chapter 11 of *The Story* features the remarkable saga of David and Goliath. It’s a classic underdog story. David, a young shepherd boy, is pitted against Goliath, a giant of a man measuring nine-feet tall. For 40 days running, Goliath has stood before the cowering soldiers of Israel to raise his boast, “Am I not a Philistine?” (1 Samuel 17:8). In the original Hebrew, the sense of his brag is even more audacious, “Am I not the Philistine?” Am I not the biggest, baddest Philistine in all the land?

David plays a bit part in our story. He’s a water boy, shuttling supplies to Israel’s troops, including his brothers. While on delivery, David hears Goliath’s rant and steps forward to do battle with him. King Saul and his brothers dismiss David’s offer as sheer bravado. But David presses the issue, “The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the bear will deliver me from the hand of the Philistine” (17:37).

David is outfitted in battle armor but finds it too bulky. Instead, he takes his slingshot and five smooth stones from a nearby stream. Goliath is incensed that the Israelites have sent a boy to do a man’s job. But David doesn’t back down: “You come against me with sword and spear, but I have come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel” (17:45).

David launches a stone that hits Goliath right between the eyes. He never knows what hit him. Goliath hits the ground with such force that it
rattles the windows back in Philistia. Mighty Goliath has fallen! The Israelite army regains their courage and routs the opposition.

I preached on this Goliath story last year in the sermon series on David. We can face our giants since the Lord will fight for us. This time around, I want to turn this sermon outward to our wider American culture. Serving one church so long helps me to see things I might have missed had I moved around. I have watched our American culture morph right before my eyes. It is virtually unrecognizable from when I came in 1979. Our culture is decidedly more secular today. By secular I mean nonreligious.

According to the Pew research, one in five Americans now identify their religious preference as “none.” This number has grown 25 percent in the last five years alone.

Secularism is nothing new to the American culture but the current wave of secularism is far more aggressive and militant. A growing number of Americans insist religion must be something private and removed from public discourse. This new secularism wants to enforce a uniformly secular vision on American society. Anyone who fails to embrace this secular vision will be labeled intolerant and treated as such.

Let me illustrate the point. InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IV) has ministered to college students since 1941. IV has local chapters in over 600 colleges and universities nationwide. Our church supports IV at the University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, Virginia Commonwealth, George Mason and the University of North Carolina.

InterVarsity recently lost campus access at the California State University system, America’s largest university. Cal State approved a non-discriminatory policy that student groups must allow all students to become leaders. The leadership of IV must therefore be open to any student, regardless of whether that student agrees with their beliefs or even actively opposes them. IV has a code of Christian ethics and a statement of belief to which all student
leaders subscribe. This ruling means IV must refrain from requiring leaders to affirm their core beliefs and code of conduct if it wants to remain on campus. Since IV couldn’t comply, they no longer have campus access.

It seems self-evident that religious groups would want to confine their leadership to those who share their beliefs. IV exercises religious liberty, not discrimination when they set standards for their leaders. In the name of nondiscrimination, Cal State is effectively discriminating against those groups who set standards for their leaders.

Would the Democratic Student Association want student leaders who don’t embrace the Democratic Party Platform? Would the African-American Student Association permit a white supremacist as leader? This nondiscrimination policy belies common sense.

Cal State doesn’t hold fraternities and sororities to the same nondiscrimination policy. Fraternities and sororities are not asked to adhere to a first-come, first-pledge selection process. These fraternal organizations engage in sex discrimination whenever they discriminate against people of the opposite sex.

Perhaps I’m making too big a deal out of this one example. Yet, in the past 18 months, InterVarsity’s status as a recognized campus organization has been challenged in 41 colleges and universities across our land.

Radical secularists also have Christian colleges in their sights. The accreditation of Christian colleges is also coming under fire. Since Christian colleges require students and faculty to sign a statement of faith and code of conduct, such institutions cannot be considered academically free.

The City of Houston issued a subpoena last month requiring certain pastors to turn over their sermons in violation of the city’s recently passed nondiscrimination policy. Churches rose up and protested this intrusive action and the city rescinded its subpoena. It’s another example of nondiscrimination gone wild.

One of the lasting contributions of American society is our commitment to religious freedom. Religious pluralism is under assault around the world. We Americans have long believed pluralism to be essential to a free society.
Kathleen McCartney, president of Smith College in Massachusetts, asked in an article, “Is free speech at risk at our universities?” Incident-ally, the commencement speaker at Smith College bowed out last spring after receiving protests for her role as Managing Director of the Inter-national Monetary Fund. President McCartney makes the obvious and essential point that reasonable people disagree. She argues for the importance of vigorous debate around the issues that matter to Americans today. She observes how students are ill-equipped to engage in healthy debate. She speaks about the ideological echo chambers that are perpetuated in social media and cable news outlets. McCartney also talks about the need for civil discourse, a practice so absent from public life these days.

Tolerance used to mean the capacity to forebear with people with whom we disagree. In the new definition of tolerance, we must accept all viewpoints. We have gone from respectful disagreement to indiscriminate acceptance. Anyone who doesn’t embrace this new understanding of tolerance will not be tolerated. This new tolerance strikes me as inherently intolerant.

It’s not my intent today to get you all riled up and raise your blood pressure. I’m careful, from this pulpit, not to preach partisan politics. No, what I’m talking about today has serious implications for religious liberty and the church.

I offer two recommendations for your consideration. First, we need to be informed. The sons of Issachar are described in the Old Testament as people who “understood the times” (1 Chronicles 12:32). Would that we would understand the times! We need to know the level of resistance from secular culture if we are to face our giants.
Second, we must be willing to speak up graciously. Secular thought police want you to believe that religiously-shaped values have no place in the public marketplace of ideas. Don’t buy it. Paul reminds us in Ephesians, to “speak the truth in love” (4:15). There is still a place for truth in our day. God’s Word speaks clarity to the moral confusion of our day. There’s also a place for civility.

Dan Cathy is president of Chick-fil-A. When he came out in support of traditional marriage in 2012, he was vilified by gay and lesbian groups. Dan took the initiative to reach out to Shane Windmeyer, national director of an LGBT group called Campus Pride which initiated a boycott against his company. He invited Shane to dinner to discuss their difference and explore matters of common interest. They had a pleasant evening and developed a friendship. Dan invited Shane to be his guest at the Chick-fil-A Bowl later that year.

Shane wrote an op-ed piece in the Huffington Post entitled, “Coming out as a friend of Dan Cathy.” In the article, Shane praised Dan for “taking the initiative, listening responsibly, sharing his convictions honestly and seeking first to understand rather than to be understood….We learned about each other as people with opposing views, not as opposing people.”

Maybe it’s hard for you to concentrate on this behemoth called American culture right now since you are facing giants of a far more personal nature: health issues, family concerns, job transition, marriage or a relationship crisis. Take a page from David’s story. This God we worship has our best interests at heart. This God will fight for you.

In chapter 4 of The Story, we read the story of God’s deliverance from the Red Sea. When the Egyptians had God’s people pinned against the sea, Moses declares, “The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still” (Exodus 14:14).

The Lord will fight for you; fight for you!