

June 6, 2021

The Second Sunday after Pentecost

"THE GREENER GRASS SYNDROME"

1 Samuel 8:4-20 ~ 2 Corinthians 4:13-51:1 ~ Mark 3:20-35

One night when I was serving my first church in Wisconsin, I was driving back from a hospital that was about forty miles away from my parish. A beloved member of our congregation lay dying, and I had spent the majority of my day at the bedside with the members of her family. It had been both beautiful and tragic ... a day filled with tears and laughter. That was during the time when I was driving back and forth to Chicago each week to complete both my master's thesis and my MDiv degree. I was weary with the weight of the church and the seminary ... and the thought occurred to me to just keep on driving ... past my exit, past Kansas City, past Dallas, all the way to Mexico. I didn't, of course. I stayed my course and came back home as usual, but I did share the story with friends. I was surprised by how many of them connected to it immediately ... because I suppose it's universal.

We all have problems. And we all have times we would like to run away. Most of us don't ... and those who do usually discover that they have carried their problems with them. We all have our own challenges, and it is how we respond to these challenges that leads to growth and good character ... or to patterns of dysfunction and chronic flaws.

We want ... we expect ... God to help with our problems, but God doesn't always do what we want. Usually, rather than removing our problems, God is with us *in* our problems so that we might grow by overcoming them. But we want an easier way.

You remember the old story about the man who asks his friend for a loan? The friend says no, and the man responds angrily "Then you're no friend of mine!" And the friend says, "Wait a minute. Didn't I block for you when you were a running back in high school?" "Yeah." "And didn't I introduce you to my girlfriend who is now your wife?" "Yeah." "And didn't I stay up all night with you to study so you could pass your college Algebra class?" "Yeah." "And didn't I co-sign the loan for your first house?" "Yeah." "Then how can you say I'm no friend of yours?" The man thought a moment and answered, "Well, what have you done for me lately?"

God had liberated the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt. God had led them through the wilderness, fed them, instructed them, made them a people. God brought them into the land of promise, a land flowing with milk and honey and delivered them from their enemies. And how did the people respond? "What have you done for us lately, God? We don't want to trust in you. Faith is too hard. We want a King like all the nations around us. Their Kings lead them and protect them and take care of all their problems. We want a King, and then we can be a strong nation like they are ... maybe even a world-ruling empire someday."

How many times have your children said something like, "But everybody else is doing it? "Everyone else's parents are letting them go!""? I have to admit that I was guilty of saying it to my parents. After all, we like to think that if "everyone else" is doing something, it can't be wrong. That's essentially how the Israelites thought. Since all the other nations had a king, they told Samuel that they wanted one too. After all, if everyone else had a king, it must be right, right?

Samuel, however, had a decidedly different take on a potential Israelite monarchy. God's perception, while hardly clear-cut, also differed from the Israelites'. The period of Israel's judges was a time of great confusion and conflict. God appointed judges by anointing them with God's Spirit. That Spirit fell on both the great, like Deborah, and the less-than-great, like Samson. Yet virtually each judge enjoyed some success, followed by failure whose solution awaited another divinely appointed judge.

Israel's last judge was Samuel. In a real sense, however, he was much more than just a judge. Samuel ruled virtually every aspect of Israel's culture, including its economics and politics, as well as religion. He also largely ruled effectively.

Yet as 1 Samuel 8 opens, the prophet is aging. While he's still in charge, he has appointed his sons to be Israel's new judges. So as our text unfolds, it's clear that Samuel wants his sons to rule over Israel. While he still could, he even established them as judges in Israel's far southern deserts.

However, there was one major hitch in Samuel's prophetic succession plan. His sons didn't take after him. They only looked out for themselves as they accepted bribes and perverted justice. Samuel had dedicated his life to providing Israel with godly and stable leadership. However, his heirs quickly become famous for ungodly and unjust leadership.

So virtually everyone recognized that neither Israel nor God should let Samuel's sons rule. Certainly, then, wise and godly Samuel would also recognize that Israel needs someone else to rule, wouldn't he? After all, he might die at any time, leaving his sons in control.

Perhaps that's why Israel's elders approached the aging prophet at his home in Ramah. "You're an old man whose sons don't follow in your footsteps," they reminded him. "So give us what everybody else has – a king to rule us." That at first glance certainly sounded like a logical request. Since his family isn't very godly, why shouldn't he just go ahead and appoint a king, just like the other nations have? Won't that at least create some political stability as well as keep power out of the morally grubby hands of Samuel's sons Joel and Abijah?

Samuel, however, could see no wisdom in this plea for a king. He recognized that Israel's desire to be like "all the other nations" conflicted with her status as God's special people. Samuel also knew that God longed to form a people in God's image rather than in the image of everyone else.

Yet when Samuel prays about it, God's reply wasn't what he hoped and may even assumed it will be. "Go ahead and do what Israel is asking," the Lord said. "It's me rather than you that Israel's rejecting ... Let them have their way. But be sure to warn them to be careful what they ask for. They may, after all, just get it."

So, the angry, aging prophet described a king who will be out of control, a petty tyrant who will "take" virtually everything away from his subjects. Six times he warned that Israel's king would take everything, from her children ... to her land ... to her sources of income. And what would be the result of all this royal taking? In verse 17 Samuel bluntly warns Israel that she would become her kings' "slaves."

You might think that would have thoroughly rattled the Israelites. God, after all, had already freed them once from brutal slavery in Egypt. Now Samuel predicts a return to such horrible slavery. It doesn't much matter, after all, whether the monarch is an Egyptian pharaoh or an Israelite king. Tyrants are only interested in what's theirs.

However, Samuel's Israel longed more than almost anything else to be just like "all the other nations." By God's amazing grace, Israel had enjoyed an intimate relationship with God that none of "the other nations" enjoyed. Yet the Israelites remained stubbornly willing to surrender that uniqueness in order to be just like all the other nations, no matter how much it costs them.

Of course, history shows that God and Samuel were right to be so leery about a monarchy. Saul, after all, was a terrible failure as a king. David, while successful as a king, was a failure as a father and husband. What's more, King Solomon fulfilled nearly to the letter all the furious warnings Samuel issued before he ever crowned a king.

Those kings helped lead Israel's downhill charge toward ungodliness that ended up in near-obliteration. However, the Lord graciously used even Israel's deeply flawed and disobedient

desire for a monarch to work out the Lord's own will. After all, who turns out to be not just Israel, but also the whole world's King? Jesus Christ ... a great, great, great grandson of one of Israel's kings, David.

I have to wonder, why are we so poorly skilled at contentment. We lose our perspective. God has given us so much ... taken care of us ... given us resources and education and opportunities shared by few in the history of humankind ... families and friends and church and community and nation ... none of them perfect but all of them blessings. And how do we respond? "What have you done for us lately, God? It isn't enough. It isn't perfect. If only you would take care of this problem, if only you would give me this thing, then I would be content." Discontented, we look to some other god ... we search for a great national leader ... we worship some celluloid saint ... we put all our faith in family or fame or some other low-performing god in the hopes that we'll get what we want. For the Hebrews, it was a King. They wanted security over faith ... organization over trust ... the protection of authority over the responsibility of freedom. And God relented to their stubborn will. And they suffered the consequences of their foolishness.

Are we satisfied with what God offers us in Christ? Do we trust Jesus to provide what we need, even if it doesn't match everything we want? Or do we want miracles, mystery, and authority ... some King, symbolic or real ... to make everything easy for us at the cost of our dignity, intelligence, and freedom? And will we welcome Jesus as he is, with all the insecurity and uncertainty and effort that following him in freedom requires ... or will we have warm admiration in our hearts for him ... without letting him change our minds? Are we truly grateful for all that God has done for us in Christ? Do we really want what God wants for us ... and nothing more? And will we make Christ, and Christ alone, our sovereign after all?

The lesson in our story from the Hebrew Scriptures is clear to me. First, be careful what you ask for because God might let you have it. Second, trust in God above everything else to give you what you need because any other god will fail you ... and any other sovereign will enslave you. And third, what you ask of God should flow from your gratitude for what God has already given you. Praise God from whom all blessings flow, even the blessings disguised as our problems. That's the message I see here today.

May we pray?

As Reinhold Niebuhr prayed, "God grant us the serenity to change the things we can, to accept the things we can't, and the wisdom to know the difference." We ask, O God, to help us trust you more, for Jesus' sake. Amen.