**Preaching Notes for the Third Sunday after Pentecost (June 14, 2015)**

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**1 Samuel 15:34-16:13
2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17**

**Mark 4:26-34**

[**1 Samuel 15:34-16:13**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=206#hebrew_reading) **(***Note that these Preaching Helps are intended to relate as part of a series to the notes from the previous week’s Preaching Helps for the Old Testament reading. If you have not read the* [***Preaching Helps from June 7, 2015***](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lectionary-calendar/second-sunday-after-pentecost5)***,*** *it would be helpful to read them and have them in mind before you read the notes immediately below.)*

This week, we continue in our exploration of Israel’s leadership transition from judges to kings. This text offers a unique and timely opportunity for comparing and contrasting their experience with some of our own present day challenges in the United Methodist Church (see [**notes from June 7, 2015**](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/lectionary-calendar/second-sunday-after-pentecost5) for a full explanation). The reading for today begins with the end of Saul’s reign and the beginning of the rise of David to Israel’s throne. It is David’s reign that will occupy the majority of this summer’s lessons from the Hebrew Scriptures. As such, today’s reading offers an opportunity to walk the congregation through the story of Israel’s first king, Saul, and the call of its second king, David.

Saul was a handsome young man from the tribe of Benjamin: “There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else” (1 Samuel 9:2). During a journey to retrieve his father’s lost herd of donkeys, Saul’s traveling companion learns of a seer, a man of God, who is passing through a nearby town. The men decide to seek him out, ostensibly so they can ask him for help in locating their lost animals.

But of course, as is often the case in the Bible, there is a backstory. As it happens, the day before the young and handsome Saul and his companion went looking for this “seer,” the Lord had spoken to this man of God, whose name happened to be Samuel, and told him to be on the lookout for the next king. The Lord told Samuel that the very next day a man would come to him. When he arrived, Samuel was to anoint him to be the new ruler over Israel, and he was to be the king that the people were demanding. The Lord told Samuel this man from the tribe of Benjamin would be the one to deliver the people from the hand of the Philistines.

And so when Samuel spotted Saul approaching, the Lord identified Saul as the one about whom the Lord had spoken. Samuel invited Saul and his companion to join him for dinner, and Saul responded by saying that he was a nobody from an humble family that was part of the least important of the twelve tribes. He asked Samuel why he would extend such an invitation to someone like him. Samuel didn’t answer, but Saul accepted the invitation.

The next day Samuel, instructed Saul to send his companion ahead and wait for him at a certain location so that Samuel could bring Saul the Word of the Lord. Saul did as he was instructed. When Samuel arrived on the scene, he immediately began the procedure for anointing Saul as Israel’s first king. After the anointing, Samuel assured Saul that he would receive signs to help him confirm he had been chosen by God to be Israel’s first king (for details see 1 Samuel 10:1-13). Most of the signs came to pass, and Saul was reassured of his calling.

During his forty-two-year reign (1 Samuel 13:1), Saul conducted successful military campaigns against the Moabites, the Ammonites, the Edomites, and the kings of Zobah, the Philistines, and the Amelekites. But with the final groups, he made a fatal mistake. After the battle with the Philistines, Samuel instructed Saul to kill all of the surviving Amelekites. Saul’s armies successfully killed all the men, women, children, and poor quality livestock, but they decided to spare the king and the best livestock. Samuel discovered that Saul has been disobedient, and he was forced to deliver the news that because of his errors in judgment, God had rejected him as king. Samuel then killed the Amelekite king himself and left Saul behind. Samuel grieved deeply over the loss of Saul, but the Lord was only sorry that he had ever made Saul the king. Samuel never saw Saul again until the day of his death.

God then proceeded to send Samuel forth on a search for Saul’s replacement. The Lord commanded him to go to Bethlehem where he met the sons of Jesse. One by one they come to stand before Samuel. The Lord told Samuel not to look upon the men as mortals would see them, but to look on their hearts. Samuel did as the Lord instructed; and one by one, each of the sons was rejected.

Finally, they sent for the youngest son, David, who was out in the fields keeping the sheep. David had beautiful eyes, ruddy skin, and was very handsome. The Lord immediately identified him as the next king. And so Samuel anointed him and, as the writer puts it, “the spirit of the Lord comes mightily upon him from that day forward.” With these transitions, Israel became a nation led not by judges, but by kings.

The shift from Samuel to Saul can be compared to the Plan UMC reorganization proposal. The basic problem that needs to be resolved in the transition from Samuel to Saul was the conflict between the prophetic style of leadership characterized by Samuel and the judges that came before him (what my colleague Taylor Burton-Edwards has termed “leadership of the people”), and the kingship (“representative leadership over the people”) of Saul and David and all those who come after them. The “judges” period was focused on the faithful upholding of the covenant tradition. Samuel and his predecessors were prophets, not kings. And although the judges served in some judicial and priestly roles, their primary task was to uphold the historical identity of Israel, which was grounded in the covenant tradition.

Saul represents the first leader under a new form of governing: that of the king. He is the first leader of this type for the nation, so there is no historical precedent to guide his work. Samuel is deeply conflicted about Israel’s need for a king. His concern is that this new way of doing business is potentially a threat to the covenant tradition and, indeed, the very identity of God’s chosen people. And so Saul’s leadership is, perhaps from the very start, undermined by the strength of the very tradition that he has been called to renew and revitalize. As Bruce C. Birch, writing in the commentary **from** [***The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume II***](https://www.cokesbury.com/forms/ProductDetail.aspx?pid=443259)(Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), puts it:

Samuel has sometimes been accused of rejecting Saul out of vested interests in maintaining the ideology of an old order. This is always a danger for those who must make judgments concerning leadership . . . We do well to remember that if Samuel rejected Saul with any thought of returning to the safety of an old, familiar order of things, God did not let this happen. God summoned Samuel out of his grief and sent him to anoint David, an even more radical departure from the old patterns and ideologies of the tribal league. If we are tempted to reject leaders in the name of God, hoping for the comfort of the “way we’ve always done things,” we can be certain that God will find yet more challenging ways of raising up leaders to move us toward the future of God’s kingdom (*NIB,* 1094*).*

Replacing a leader or changing or reorganizing a structure that has been in place for many years is never an easy thing. I can think of many occasions where the success or failure of a new appointment was in some ways predetermined by whether or not the new pastor had a similar style of leadership to that of his or her predecessor, or one that was radically different. Perhaps this is the reason that some congregations today are reluctant to simply accept an appointment of a successor by the bishop, especially when a congregation has been thriving under the previous leadership. They would prefer to find someone with a similar leadership style for the sake of continuity.

The story suggests that there are a number of issues we should keep before us if we decide to go forward with a new structure in the denomination and move in a direction that is more like “kings” than “judges.”

First, we may have great difficulty picking out the leadership qualities that signal potential if they are not externally visible to us. Can we really look beyond our own preconceived or culturally-driven notions of “success” and choose leaders who can truly lead us into God’s kingdom? If we can’t discern the person whom God would truly choose to lead us, what will happen?

Second, is there a way to ensure that the power held by those in key positions is kept in some kind of check? Part of the beauty of a system that involves “leadership of the people” is that there are many voices and t many built-in checks and balances to ensure that minority opinions and dissenting positions are heard along with those of the majority. The problem is that this body of leadership has become so large and meets so infrequently that the cost of doing business this way is unsustainable. The sheer number of participants has made decision-making nearly impossible.

And third, the “judges” model requires that each participant self-regulates and actively chooses to uphold the covenant We live in a time when many members are refusing to adhere to our agreed upon covenant, sometimes for compelling reasons.

As we recall from last week, Samuel’s concerns about moving to a “king” model of leadership included worries about the king’s power; possible misuse of the sons and daughters of Israel; and control of the nation’s assets, both monetary and products of human labor. We might consider what similar abuses could potentially occur in a United Methodist model with a more centralized power structure.

I don’t know what the future of the United Methodist Church holds. I hope and pray we can be open to change if that is what God has in store for us. But I also hope and pray that we keep before us these stories from our shared past, looking to them for both visions of hope and tales of caution.

[**2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=206#epistle_reading)

I’m not going to go into all of the theological dimensions of Paul’s argument here, as there are plenty of places that you can read about that elsewhere. Instead, I want to bring focus to two lines that particularly spoke to me:

“For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised again (2 Corinthians 5:14-15, NIV\*).

Do you believe this? Do you really believe that every single person who lives and breathes and walks on this earth has equal value simply because Christ has “died for all”? Do you believe that every person, whoever he is, whether or not she has responded to Christ or rejected him, or worships in a church or a Synagogue or a mosque or a Hindu temple or on a hiking trail, or maybe doesn’t even believe in God, has equal value and is equally treasured by God simply because Christ “died for them and was raised again”?

Because according to Paul, from the moment of Christ’s death, everyone, *every human being on the face of the earth*, has been given intrinsic value. I want to suggest that many of us do not believe this. Or at least we do not live as if we believe this.

In fact, most of us live quite the opposite of this. We want to say, “*IF* you do this, you do that, you live this way, you say these words, you vote this way, you vote that way, *THEN* you will have value.”

But Paul says that each person’s value has already been established through Christ’s death. The individual’s value does not depend on the response to that death. We don’t need to know whether or not a person has confessed Christ as his or her personal Lord and Savior before we decide to treat him or her with dignity and respect. We don’t need to know if someone is a woman or a man, a black person or a person of Hispanic or Asian descent, a Muslim or a Buddhist, a degreed professional or a high school dropout, a corporate executive or a police officer, a gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, or a queer person. We don’t need to know anything about the person, because we already know all we need to know: he or she is valuable because Christ died FOR him or her.

Knowing this, how would Christ’s love compel us to live differently?

* What would the world look like if we who call ourselves followers of Jesus Christ actually lived as if every person were valuable?
* Would it change the way we treat those who look different from us, or who are from a different cultural background, or gender, or social class, or religious tradition?
* Would it change our decisions about what to buy if we knew the person who made that t-shirt or television or trinket was subjected to devaluing, inhumane working conditions?
* Would it transform our law enforcement or our military if they began to think of the “enemy” as though the enemy had as much value as their wife or husband or children back at home?
* Would it transform our neighborhoods if we could stop thinking of “them” as the less-valuable people who moved in and brought down the once prosperous and well-tended community where our church building is located?

[**Mark 4:26-34**](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=206#gospel_reading)

Recently I went with my husband and one of our dogs on my favorite hike in the whole world. That is saying a lot, because I have been on a lot of amazing walks all over the globe. But there is something about his hike.

The climax of the hike is the Pickens Nose bluff that offers an amazing view of the Nantahala Mountains. But on this hike, for me, getting there is actually more fun that being there. Why? Because the entire route is covered in my favorite plant: rhododendrons.

I didn’t know about “rhodies,” as we call them around here, until I moved to East Tennessee. They are the most amazing plant. They are hardy, blooming, high-altitude loving evergreens, and they grow to sizes that literally create arched tunnels of beautiful shade. In the springtime, they produce the most magnificent flowers you’ve ever seen. They appear in many different sizes, varieties, and colors. But they are beautiful even without their fancy blooms.

***(Post Picture here****)*

As I walked through that arched cathedral of rhododendrons on a spring Sunday afternoon, my heart filled with such a sense of wonder and joy and gratitude that it took my breath away (and not just because of the altitude)! It was one of those moments that catch you off guard. For a moment, you know you’ve been graced with a glimpse of the incredible handiwork of our divine creator.

You know what I mean, right? You’ve had those moments.

They come to us as a miraculous gift that comes along and fills us with wonder and gratitude and joy from the top of our head to the tips of our toes. Such moments feel like a sign from God being poured over us. They make us feel giddy with wonder. They make us feel that for a moment all is right with the world. Everything is suddenly beautiful; our hearts are so filled with love and joy and wonder that we feel we are going to burst.

Jesus would say that to have that kind of a moment and to be reminded of God at a moment like that is to enter God’s Kingdom. In fact, Jesus did say something almost exactly like that in this lesson from Mark’s Gospel.

Jesus said, “The Kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

Jesus was telling the people of his time that the everyday things they most took for granted—the fields of wheat that were growing all around them, the life that was going on in the communities where they lived, the walks they took with their families along beautiful pathways—were nothing less than a miracle. He was reminding them that God was the power and force behind and in all life. And he was saying that it is in those moments in life, when we suddenly have the eyes of our hearts opened to the realization that all of creation is the work of God’s hand, that is when we catch a glimpse of the Kingdom of God.

* It is a miracle to have such a moment!
* It is a gift from God!
* And our hearts are filled with wonder and love and joy so much that we think we are just going to burst!

Jesus more than anyone else who has ever lived was able to see the power and force of God that is behind all life. But even with the insight of the very One who made him, and who by the Spirit was one with him, Jesus saw the hand of a loving God most profoundly in the seemingly ordinary things that surround us every day. Jesus was not simply awestruck at the wonder of life. He was moved to the profoundest kind of gratitude and fell on his knees before his father and the creator of us all, bidding us all to also fall on our knees before the God of all creation.

In Jesus, God’s mysterious power was wrapped into a human face, given a human voice, and equipped with human hands. In Jesus, God looked at us with eyes of infinite sorrow and compassion. God spoke to us in words of gentle, timeless instruction, and reached out and touched us, healed us, even turned death into life, in order to show us grace beyond all our powers of imagination.

Don’t we feel the power of God’s grace? Don’t we feel the power of God’s compassion and love? Don’t we feel the power of the Spirit? Don’t we feel it when we gather with our community of faith to praise and worship the very One who made us and everything we know possible?

We live in a world that is surrounded by God’s grace. What an incredible feeling of grace is a sign from God. The signs of God are all around us. The Kingdom of God is truly at hand when we know that we live surrounded by grace, and when we know that life itself is but by the grace of God.

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