

Sermon – “Goodness, Greatness”

Sunday, June 17, 2018

Scripture Readings: 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13 and Mark 4:26-34

Trajan McGill

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first reading continues our series over the last few weeks of brief stops in the life of the prophet Samuel. Last week we heard of him anointing Israel’s first king, Saul. Today we hear chapter 15, verse 34, through chapter 16, verse 13, taking place later. Saul has disobeyed God, and God here has Samuel anoint a replacement for him on the throne of Israel. Listen now for the Word of God to you.

15:34 Then Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul.

35 Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.

16:1 The LORD said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.” 2 Samuel said, “How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.” And the LORD said, “Take a heifer with you, and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.’ 3 Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.” 4 Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem.

The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, “Do you come peaceably?”

5 He said, “Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.” And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

6 When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely the Lord’s anointed is now before the LORD.” 7 But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”

8 Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” 9 Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” 10 Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, “The LORD has not chosen any of these.”

11 Samuel said to Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” And he said, “There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.” 12 He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome.

The LORD said, “Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.” 13 Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward.

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Our second reading comes from the Gospel According to Mark, chapter 4, verses 26 through 34. Here Jesus is teaching his disciples, and we join him in the middle of a series of parables discussing the kingdom of God. Listen for the Word of God.

²⁶He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

³⁰He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

³³With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

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Back when I was working in the business world, a book by a gentleman named James C. Collins made the rounds of corporate America. It was called *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't*. It is possible you have read it yourself; it was one of those corporate leadership books that become the popular thing of the moment and are all over the best-seller lists for a while.

I never read it, myself.

So I can neither praise the book nor criticize it, nor engage in depth with the points Mr. Collins was trying to make. I am, however, going to talk a little bit about one point he was not trying to make. Let me read you one of the most popular quotes from that book, one which even many of us who have not read the book have heard somewhere along the way. Collins had the following to say about goodness and greatness:

"Good is the enemy of great. And that is one of the key reasons why we have so little that becomes great. We don't have great schools, principally because we have good schools. We don't have great government, principally because we have good government. Few people attain great lives, in large part because it is just so easy to settle for a good life."¹

Now, there's something to this. It's even kind of inspiring. But I said I was *not* going to engage with the points he was *trying* to make, so let us just allow his words to stand for the time being, and go visit our Scripture readings for a moment before coming back to this.

¹ Collins, James. From *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don't*.

Our first reading, from the book of 1 Samuel, speaks of the moment Israel's second king is anointed. Their first King, Saul, has caused problems and has turned aside from obedience to God,² and the prophet Samuel, the same prophet who anointed Saul, has been sent by God to mark the man who will take over the throne next. Now, Saul is still alive at this point, so anointing a new king is a very provocative action, which is why you may have noticed everyone is a bit afraid of what is happening.

Samuel has been a prophet of the Lord for a long time at this point, so it is very interesting, and a testament to the sorts of errors to which we human beings are endlessly prone, that he makes the mistake he makes in this moment. He knows he is to anoint one of the sons of Jesse, but he does not know which until the moment the Lord tells him to anoint that one. One by one, they parade before him.

“When they came,” the passage tells us, “he looked on Eliab and thought, ‘Surely the Lord’s anointed is now before the LORD.’ But the LORD said to Samuel, ‘Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.’”³ Even Jesse, the father of these young men, is blinded by human forms of judgment, since the son who ultimately is chosen by God, David, was apparently not considered significant enough by his father even to have been brought along to the gathering.

In our reading from Mark today, we heard Jesus give two illustrations of the kingdom of God, both of which speak to the same kind of problem of discernment. “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it?” Jesus asks. It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”⁴

In other words, what appears tiny and inconsequential to us may really be a failure of our own perception. For we do not perceive, as God does, the full depth of things, much less the full future of things. “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,” Jesus also said, “and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.”⁵ The real work goes on inside, hidden from view. The outer appearance of things is deceptive and incomplete.

Of all the five senses, human beings have the greatest reliance on our sight. Appearances are nearly everything to us. What we see is what we expect to get. And when we see big, we

² See the several stories related in 1 Samuel 13-15 of him making an unlawful sacrifice, making a rash oath that causes harm to his soldiers and almost results in the death of his son thanks to his stubbornness, and then keeping the best of the spoils of victory over the Amalekites after being told by God to destroy everything.

³ 1 Samuel 16:6-7 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

⁴ Mark 4:30-32 (*NRSV*).

⁵ Mark 4:26-28 (*NRSV*).

expect importance. When we see small, we expect nothing. When we see shiny, we expect great value. When we see superficial ugliness, or beauty, thoroughgoing ugliness, or beauty, is all that we can imagine is before us.⁶

Because of this, we have a powerful tendency to hugely mistake the relative importance or value of things. Jesus's words about the mustard seed are powerful because it somehow *surprises us*, goes against human expectation, for a tiny seed you can barely see to grow into a major, consequential plant which can spread out widely and give shade to the birds of the air.

And so we turn back to our earlier words about goodness and greatness. "Good is the enemy of great," said James Collins. And that may be true, so far as it goes. But I would propose that as followers of Christ, knowing well the ways in which we and the world are drawn astray, we would do well to turn that statement around completely backwards.

If I were to rewrite the quote I shared with you earlier, to try to speak some even more important words of truth that this world needs to hear, and we the disciples of our Lord need to remember, it might go something like this: "Great is the enemy of good. That is one of the key reasons we have so little that becomes truly good. We don't have good institutions, because we seek to have great institutions. We don't have leaders who seek goodness, because we let ourselves fall for leaders who seek greatness."

You will have noticed that I am playing with words, using the word "great" rather differently than Collins did in the original quote. That is the tricky thing about the word "great"; it shares two meanings. Often it is used to mean the next level beyond merely "good". ("That breakfast cereal is not just good, it is great!")

But at its root, the word "great" is a synonym for "big". "The Great Depression" is called that because it was massive, not because it was one step better than "The Good Depression." The "Great Lakes" are the ones which, put next to every other lake, are impressively enormous.

"Great," in this sense, is an amoral word. I don't mean *immoral*, meaning morally wrong; I mean *amoral*, which is to say it lacks moral content one way or the other. It just speaks of something's size, its stature, or its level of influence. That is why we can speak of Napoleon, for instance, as a "*great* leader" among historical generals even though we would almost never speak of a military officer who seizes power in a *coup d'état*, as Napoleon did, as a *good* leader.

⁶ Of course, there is a set of people for whom sight is *not* the most important sense- that is, those who are blind. And it is a very interesting question, one which my own experience is not sufficient to answer, whether being without sight changes the moral pitfalls to which one is susceptible. Size-- or any of the traits one constantly measures and observes with one's eyes-- may not count for as much in your patterns of thinking when you cannot see those things! Surely there are other sensory perceptions and evaluations which take their place, then, as potential occasions for passing superficial judgment. But with so incredibly much of the thinking of those of us who are sighted resting on visual metaphor, visual evaluation, and visual imagination, it may well be that the ways in which "greatness" is internally conceived of are a wholly different experience for someone blind from birth. I would be interested to know, as I speak from ignorance on this front, but it is clear at least that the paragraph above does not apply uniformly to literally everyone, which is worth acknowledging here.

And by mixing these two meanings together, muddying the difference between the two, the word “great” perfectly mirrors the human tendency to mistake the big, or the important-looking, for the really good, and to mistake the biggest, or the most important-looking, for the best. We are tempted by the great, and we let it push aside the good, and this is wrong.

We are tempted by the great in our work. Achievement is a form of creativity, and to seek it and accomplish it is a worthy pursuit, but the best achievement is not the biggest achievement; it is the one which does true good for other human beings. We get blinded, and we fail to recognize this, and we let the great push aside the good, and this is wrong.

We are tempted by the great in our politics. The Israelites wanted a king in the first place so they could look up to a leader elevated to great stature, like the other nations around them had, and be proud of having a person of such greatness. That impulse is no less present in the human beings of today than it was in the people of those days.

But the drive to political greatness is not, and never has been, what delivers a *good* outcome for a people. We get blinded, and we fail to remember this; we award authority over us and our neighbors, again and again throughout history, to those who are called “great” but push aside the good, and this is wrong.

We are tempted by the great in our personal lives. We seek to be outwardly impressive, and neglect our inner growth. We give our esteem and admiration to those who are outwardly impressive, and neglect those in front of us whose friendship could be true. We steer our children toward being accomplished rather than being of good character. We judge people by the cars they drive, the clothes they wear. Maybe worse, we judge ourselves by those things, and so we waste the resources we have been given to steward on things which shine instead of things which matter; being blinded by the shininess, we let the great push aside the good, and this is wrong.

We are tempted by the great even in the church, where congregations measure themselves by the number of people who attend, rather than by whether they are truly encountering Jesus Christ there; by the size of the building they can afford to display to the people who pass by rather than by whether those people would find someone who cares about them inside. How great is the temptation of the small, community church to resign itself to being nothing special because it doesn't think the energy of the Holy Spirit can work in a space that small! How great is temptation of the tall steeple church to keep its attention on being proud of itself rather than putting its significant resources to work transforming itself and the community around it!

I know a young woman preacher who was essentially disowned by her mentor because she jumped off the track of rising stars headed toward the so-called “important” pulpits in large churches when she sensed that God's call to her was to small church ministry in the rural setting. We, the church, are not immune to the temptation of the great, any more than the Israelites were when they sought a king, or Samuel was when he mistook David's older, taller brother for the next leader of their people. Here, too, we let the great push aside the good.

But this does not have to be so. Not if we remember what we believe. Our savior himself, the king over all kings, lived with none of the trappings of royalty or greatness. He considered these meaningless and fleeting things, and it was not greatness, but goodness that he taught, turning human wisdom upside-down. It is about being the one who serves, not the one served. The first shall be last, and the last shall be first. It is not the elevated in stature, but whoever becomes humble, like a child, who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

All week our children here were taught about what it means to be a true hero, a champion of the Lord, and they came back again and again to a single verse of Psalm 34, paraphrased: “Do good, seek peace, and go after it.” For true heroism is not achieved when you courageously face danger and overcome major obstacles to accomplish the great; it is achieved when you courageously face danger and overcome major obstacles to do good. Let us re-learn this, too, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, may we all “go after it.” Amen.