

Sermon – “It Shall Not Be So Among You”

Sunday, June 7, 2015

Scripture Readings – 1 Samuel 8, Matthew 20:20-28

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Our 1<sup>st</sup> reading tells of Israel on the verge of transition from Judges to Kings. Since conquering Canaan, Israel had had shared identity and law, but no central government, drawing in crisis on persons known as “judges” who arose to lead in some way. With outside pressure, envy of other, stronger governments, and corruption within, they now reacted by seeking to establish a king. Hear these words from 1 Samuel 8.

*1 When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. 2 The name of his firstborn son was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beer-sheba. 3 Yet his sons did not follow in his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice. 4 Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, 5 and said to him, "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations." 6 But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to govern us." Samuel prayed to the Lord, 7 and the Lord said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. 8 Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. 9 Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them." 10 So Samuel reported all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. 11 He said, "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; 12 and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. 13 He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. 14 He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. 15 He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. 16 He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. 17 He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. 18 And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day." 19 But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, "No! but we are determined to have a king over us, 20 so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles." 21 When Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the Lord. 22 The Lord said to Samuel, "Listen to their voice and set a king over them." Samuel then said to the people of Israel, "Each of you return home." Amen.*

Our second reading for today comes from the Gospel according to Matthew, Chapter 20, beginning with the 20<sup>th</sup> verse. Listen now for the Word of God to you:

*20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling before him, she asked a favor of him. 21 And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." 22 But Jesus*

answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." **23** He said to them, "You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father." **24** When the ten heard it, they were angry with the two brothers. **25** But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. **26** It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, **27** and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; **28** just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

The title of the sermon: "It Shall Not Be So Among You"

The text: "... whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant" Matthew 20:26

In the fall of 2005, as I was preparing to head back out east for my second year of seminary, a tropical storm known by the name Katrina grew into a hurricane, blew across southern Florida, and then, after crossing into the Gulf of Mexico, intensified dramatically, doubled in size, and then made a catastrophic, second landfall centered in Louisiana, where it quickly became one of the five deadliest hurricanes in the history of the United States, and by far the costliest, coming ashore as it did near a major city much of which was below sea level, and which was not well prepared for such a storm.

For me, seeing this event take place created some degree of discontinuity between what I was talking about, as a student of the Gospel, and what I was doing, which was talking about the Gospel in class while watching people suffering on the news. I had already had some difficulty convincing myself to go back and do three years of book learning in the middle of my late twenties, which I feared was a waste of some of my young, strong years, and so I was tempted to forget driving back to seminary and instead pack up my truck with supplies and drive straight south to New Orleans.

Good sense did get the better of me, luckily, as it quickly became apparent that the people managing the disaster had no capacity for dealing with large numbers of volunteers appearing out of nowhere. There were people who were doing that, and they were in many cases making the problem worse, not better, by adding to the number of people rescuers had to worry about. However, I was determined to do something, and when I got back to school, I started looking around for other students interested in putting together some kind of response.

As it turned out, I was not the only person thinking this way, and several of us quickly joined forces, until about half a dozen of us seminarians had come together as an *ad hoc* committee to plan and lead a Princeton Seminary mission trip to the Gulf coast. As we figured out details, connected with Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, recruited participants at the seminary, calculated costs, and raised funds, we settled on making two separate trips at different times, based on people's availability.

We also suffered from gradual attrition among our leadership group. Because of heavy, other term-time responsibilities, one by one, every person on our committee except two of us had to drop their level of commitment. People were still hoping to go along on the trip itself, but they weren't able to take much part in all the work of putting the trip together. This left only one of us wrapping up the details for each of the two trips, and so when my group departed New Jersey for Gautier, Mississippi

in January, I was the one with all the details and itineraries in hand, as basically the trip director for our collection of seminary students.

But an interesting thing happened as we began our time together. Because there were too many of us for one vehicle, we had to rent two large vans at the New Orleans airport. This meant at least one other person had to step up and be willing to drive an uncomfortably large vehicle for the entire week. Robert volunteered to do so.

But of course signing his name at the auto rental counter didn't just mean occupying the driver's seat during the journey over to Mississippi. A whole collection of responsibilities followed, and he quietly and without complaint stepped into every one. All week long, any time that van was needed, to go to the store to buy supplies, to take someone somewhere, to get to a work site or back to our camp, Robert had to be there. He never had the ease of sliding into the back seat and napping for an hour while returning after a hard day's work. He never got the effortless experience of a passenger, the opportunity to make a single trip from point A to point B without a care for navigation, fuel levels, detours, road conditions, and vigilance around other drivers.

It didn't really stop there, either. We were all there to do work, and not a person on the team was guilty of slacking off, but Robert was, even more than the rest of the crew, always there, every day ready and willing, whenever something came up that needed extra effort, to take care of it with diligence and an unassuming sense of responsibility.

By a few days into the trip, this had an interesting effect. People, particularly those in the crew he was driving back and forth every day, started looking to Robert for guidance and decision-making. They trusted his selflessness, his reliability, and his hard work on behalf of the team, and it materialized in their recognizing in him a form of authority. By no active choice, with no nominations or votes, with no words spoken on the matter, the group had come to have not one, but two leaders. He hadn't been *named* a leader; he had *emerged* as one. He had not *sought* authority, he had been silently *entrusted* with it. For the rest of that trip, it was the combination of the two of us that people looked to for direction as we made our everyday decisions. Since we were, on most days, divided into two work crews going to different sites, this worked out very well for all of us.

And so on top of all the other significant things I took out of our experiences there, I found that time on the Gulf to be a fascinating lesson in the meaning of leadership. I was, I guess you would say, "in charge" of the trip, the one with a designated position at the head of the group, but the simple act of being a consistent servant of the group and of our mission had made Robert into a universally recognized leader of the group as well.

I am sure you can see how this relates to our scripture for today. "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles"—or, literally, "the rulers of the nations"—"lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 20:25-26 (NRSV).

Jesus rewrites greatness here. One does not achieve it, in his ordering of things, by asserting control, and one does not live it out by wielding power. Greatness is found in servanthood, and it is applying yourself to the needs of others, stooping to serve them, which elevates you among them.

So greatness in the Christian model is very different from greatness in the worldly model. A high position is not one defined by how many others are working for you, but by how much you are working for others. Seeking to advance the self seems to be absent altogether from Jesus's depiction of greatness. The greatest role is not the one which acquires the most perks, fame, or fortune. The purpose of authority, if we follow Jesus's own example, is not as a thing to be grasped itself. It is a thing which stems from, and which exists to serve, tending to the well-being of others.

Our culture deals with this in a very confused manner, trying to live and talk both ways at once. We give Christ-style greatness lip service, and due to our historical Christian heritage it is written into our language, when we say things like, "So-and-so 'served' as Governor or Senator or CEO," or when we talk about our leaders as "public servants." If only calling them that made them that!

And so, tempted by worldly things as our society is, looking at those pursuing positions of power we get an incoherent mixture of seeking the standing, the privileges, and the power of high office while framing it in words of service; trying to broadcast humility and servanthood while simultaneously attempting to show off wealth, status, and rank. This is probably most evident in our institutions of government, and most hypocritical in our institutions of faith, but it is apparent everywhere around us, and, as we should be careful of, in us.

Do we understand rightly the relationship between leader and led? Who properly serves whom? Do those of lower rank serve those of higher rank? That is the way of thinking we slip into, but that is forgetful. Jesus tells us that among those who follow him, the relationship between lesser and greater is reversed; to be greater means being the servant, not being the served.

To be great, and to be in charge, then, are not the same thing. So it is important, when we do find ourselves in roles with authority, that we do not feel satisfied and think we have achieved something. We haven't achieved anything great by *attaining* authority, we achieve great things when we live out whatever position we have, and whatever power it gives us, as a means of servanthood to all those around us.

We come into positions of power, small and large, through many means. We are offered a job; we are elected to a particular role; we become adults entrusted with power over ourselves and our own resources. We become parents; we come into money or a particular station in life, or, like Robert did on that trip to Mississippi, we simply find ourselves with others looking to us as leaders. We can allow power to be a source of pride for us, but that, like being proud of having money, is nothing but silliness and vanity in the end, for greatness isn't about what is given to us or about what we've gotten, but about what we've given.

Some years ago, George W. Bush famously mentioned that he thought God wanted him to run for President. This was variously taken by different people as an example of a strong connection to his faith, as an example of his arrogance, or as an example of his scariness as someone who was unable or unwilling to differentiate between his own goals and God's.

I have never met the man myself, so I do not know quite how President Bush himself understood those words of his, nor am I going to offer any conjecture on that question here. What I do find interesting, and what it does offer us as a worthy topic for consideration, is something commentators inside the church and out mostly failed to address at the time: what does an office of authority like that actually mean, in terms of God's calling? That particular President aside, does God actually call persons to be the leaders of nations? To say "yes" feels worrisome and suggests a divine endorsement of all the disastrous, self-serving things which those office-holders do. To say "no" suggests that God has no care for who is set over us, and also runs into some difficulty when we come up against the numerous scriptural verses that demand respect for authority and for government as God-given things.

But this problem isn't new, we can see it all the way back to the situation described in 1 Samuel. After the scene we heard today, the Israelites demanding a king, God grants them their wish, and has Samuel anoint the man Saul as that king.<sup>2</sup> This is the same Saul whom God later rejects as king for disobedience,<sup>3</sup> anointing David to take his place. David, too, serves at times righteously, and at times abuses his power severely and selfishly, as does his son Solomon later, and in fact none of those who follow are pure and righteous, even in a kingship which is *definitively* established by God.

What can we take away from this? Largely, I think, that God *does* have a relationship with earthly power and our call in receiving it, and that relationship is primarily defined not as the awarding of a call to the worthy, but as a demand that we be worthy to our call. Whatever position of authority you or I attain, large or small, God *does* have a call embedded in it. It is arrogant and misguided if we interpret that as something to be proud of, for the position itself is not the call, the job title is not an achievement that makes us great. But pretending there is no call from God in it is also misguided, and dangerous, because it divorces our authority in the world from the purview of God's demands on us, lets us pretend God has nothing to say in the question of what our authority is there for.

When the mother of James and John came to Jesus and asked him that her sons be seated in positions of greatness in his kingdom, exhibiting what might be the earliest recorded instance of helicopter parenting, it is no wonder, then, that Jesus replied, "You do not know what you are asking." Greatness in his kingdom is measured by servanthood, and the cup that Jesus is about to drink, giving his life for others, is a bitter and difficult one.

"Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" he asked. "They said to him, 'We are able.' He said to them, 'You will indeed drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left, this is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.'"<sup>4</sup>

This comes off a little like Jesus is asking them a trick question. "Are you prepared to die for it?" "Yes." "Okay, you will die for it, but you still can't have it!"

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<sup>2</sup> See 1 Samuel 9-10.

<sup>3</sup> See 1 Samuel 15.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 20:22-23 (NRSV).

It takes remembering what Jesus says next, about servanthood making a person great, “just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many,”<sup>5</sup> to recognize that in promising them his cup he *has* just then promised them greatness.

Only you may know what your own call to servanthood is. It may include designated forms of leadership, those things clearly recognized as power; or it may be the servanthood of Robert on that mission trip to the Gulf coast nine years ago, where he neither had nor sought official power at all, and saw no greatness in himself; where he applied himself merely to serving the needs before him, and the greatness in that was recognized only by those with open eyes around him. However we find our own callings, let us strive to keep before us at all times the fact that they are not badges of honor; they are assignments of responsibility.

Or, as the rock band Tesla says in one of their lyrics, “It’s not what you got, it’s what you give.”<sup>6</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 20:28 (NRSV).

<sup>6</sup> Tesla, “What You Give.” *Psychotic Supper*, Geffen, 1991.