

Year B
Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
Father's Day/Nurturer's Sunday
1 Samuel 15:34 - 16:13
Psalm 20 (Call to Worship)
Mark 4:26-34

1 Samuel 15:34 - 16:13

³⁴Then Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul. ³⁵Samuel 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.

¹⁶The 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." ²Samuel 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.'" ³Invite 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." ⁴Samuel 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?" ⁵He 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.

⁶When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." ⁷But 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." ⁸Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." ⁹Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." ¹⁰Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen any of these." ¹¹Samuel 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." ¹²He 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." ¹³Then 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. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

Psalm 20

¹The Lord answer you in the day of trouble! The name of the God of Jacob protect you!

²May he send you help from the sanctuary, and give you support from Zion.

³May he remember all your offerings, and regard with favor your burnt sacrifices. Selah

⁴May he grant you your heart's desire, and fulfill all your plans.

⁵May we shout for joy over your victory, and in the name of our God set up our banners. May the Lord fulfill all your petitions.

⁶Now I know that the Lord will help his anointed; he will answer him from his holy heaven with mighty victories by his right hand.

⁷Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses, but our pride is in the name of the Lord our God.

⁸They will collapse and fall, but we shall rise and stand upright.

⁹Give victory to the king, O Lord; answer us when we call.

Mark 4:26-34

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.

Nurtured from Seed

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable and lovely in your sight, O Lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

Happy Father’s Day! Happy Nurturer-er’s Day! Happy Day!

In Worship and Education Committee, we spent a good deal of time asking how do we honor the secular holidays of Mothers’ and Fathers’ days while honoring that the diversity in family configurations, including those for whom these days are hard. We decided on Mothers’ Day to offer a prayer for all parents, and today we would honor those who mentor and nurture us. When we are seen for the gifts that we have, the gifts that we are, we can prosper and grow. Today we honor the grace of mentors and the power of the smallest, that when cared for may become shelter and create safe space for others.

What better texts could we have for such a day? First, we see Samuel looking for the king God will anoint to replace the unfaithful king Saul. Looking at Jesse’s sons, he sees the oldest and assumes this must be the one. God says, “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.”¹ We could take note of that, eh? As Samuel goes down the line of brothers looking, searching, he exhausts all of the options ,waiting

¹ 1 Samuel 16:7

for God to tell him he's found the one. Until he gets to the ruddy youth David who has to be called from the fields tending the sheep, he was so unlikely to be picked. And God says, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one."²

It would have been completely unexpected in that time for the youngest brother to be picked, Carol Grizzard points out.³ She writes, "Although 1 and 2 Samuel focus on national political changes and on the powerful men who make and benefit from them, the book begins with a powerless woman," Hannah, Samuel's mother, "in the midst of a family conflict."⁴ God consistently chooses the lowliest, the youngest, the marginalized, the least expected to be God's transformative agents in the world.⁵ Here, God chooses fresh-faced David.

Isn't it wonderful to be seen for our gifts? To be seen for our hearts? Who have been your mentors, friends? Who has seen you for who you truly are, picked you from along a line-up? Who nurtured you? And who have you nurtured in return?

I am so grateful for those who have mentored me. The list is long. A few come to mind: Ron Stief and Adora Iris Lee. I was supposed to meet Ron in Cuba at a Frontier Internships in Mission Board Meeting. (It's an organization that puts young people two years at a time in an international placement that is considered a frontier, e.g. conflict zones, and then places them at home for a year to bring the work back to their home contexts.) But Ron couldn't make it to that meeting. I just remembered his name on the guest list and noted he was a UCC minister.

Flash forward a year or so: I graduated from the College of Charleston and was contemplating what next (Grad school? International mission?) while I worked in the SC Aquarium gift shop and as a contractor for a local environmental non-profit. I decided to go to the National Council of Churches' Conference on Eco-Justice. Lo and behold, one day at lunch, I found myself sitting across from Ron Stief! By the end of the conference, he was offering me an internship, which I turned down for lack of sufficient pay. He later called me to offer the newly-created Charles E. Cobb Environmental Justice Residency at the UCC Justice and Witness Ministries office on Capitol Hill. So off I went.

Now see, Ron became a pastor because he followed a mentor of his. Ron in his youth was involved in labor organizing, and the man he most respected in that work, he found out, was actually an ordained minister. So Ron went to seminary. Ron could hang with the best of the political wonks, and when he did, he looked the part in a clerical collar and blazer. But in the office he wore Hawaiian shirts and often was barefoot. (You see my mentors?!) His admin assistant was a great gatekeeper, and should folks drop in on him, he always had a blazer hiding behind his office door. He said there was only one good reason to put a collar on: to get arrested.

² 1 Samuel 16:12

³ Carol Grizzard, "1 Samuel," in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, ed. Walter J. Harrelson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 417.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 394.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 417.

Ron saw me. He found a way for me to come to DC. He ended up giving me the responsibility of the denominational legislative portfolio on the environment in year two of my fellowship, which included interfaith collaboration and partnership with our community-based organizations across the country. He trusted me. And Adora Iris Lee, the Environmental Justice Minister, did the same. She sent me in her stead to meetings where I sat at table with the architects of the environmental justice movement. She watched me start to try to dress to fit into the Hill environment. She said one day, “Don’t forget who you work for.” She, with her African mudcloth garb, braids, and large beaded jewelry, meant, “Don’t try to fit into the politico world when you know we work for God.” She really meant, “Don’t sell out in the name of political expediency.” She was in a way, following what God said to Samuel about refusing to try to fit into what the human eye sees and wants, being true instead to the calls God has placed on our hearts.

Speaking of politics, this week we saw Jeff Sessions mis-use a line from Romans to justify separating children at the border.

“I would cite you to the Apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained the government for his purposes,” Sessions said during a speech to law enforcement officers in Fort Wayne, Ind. “Orderly and lawful processes are good in themselves. Consistent and fair application of the law is in itself a good and moral thing, and that protects the weak and protects the lawful.”⁶

Regardless of your politics, I can tell you it is always incorrect to use God’s name in vain, to distort divine teachings of any kind for political expediency and especially to oppress others. In years gone by this passage was used in defense of the institution of slavery. In this case, children are being separated from their parents at the border as a deterrent for illegal immigration, but it is equally affecting people who are legally presenting themselves for asylum. Some of you may have seen Stephen Colbert’s piece Thursday night addressing this as “the conversation we all should be having.” Colbert is a devout Catholic who knows his faith and will speak up to combat blasphemy and the misuse of scripture to back up atrocities. Colbert said:

But I will give Sessions this: That is what Romans 13:1 says — you gotta have laws. But if he just read a little bit further into Romans 13:10, it says “Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”⁷

⁶ Julie Zauzmer and Keith McMillan, “Jeff Sessions Cites Romans 13, a Bible Passage Used to Defend Slavery, in Defense of Family Separations - The Washington Post,” *Washington Post*, June 15, 2018, accessed June 16, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/06/14/jeff-sessions-points-to-the-bible-in-defense-of-separating-immigrant-families/?utm_term=.7bce39e4db70.

⁷ “Stephen Colbert Schools Jeff Sessions on the Bible,” accessed June 15, 2018, <http://www.vulture.com/2018/06/stephen-colbert-schools-jeff-sessions-on-the-bible.html>.

See what Colbert did there? He used the platform he has to cut through the laughter and show us the mirror we need as a nation. He indeed, has faith, like a mustard seed, and he's not afraid to use it. Colbert also reminds us that America is you and me. This is being done in our name.

But if yanking families apart to incite fear of seeking a better life is being done in our name, then God give us the strength to say "Not in our name!" and arise to speak God's truth of love to power.

Lord, this is a season where it would be so easy to shrink back in fear, throw our hands up, say the world is going to hell. But only if we let it. The world is made up of people like you and me. Just like in 1 and 2 Samuel, we don't have to be fancy or the likeliest to be chosen. We just have to show up, like Hannah and David, and be willing to answer God's call. We have the ability to speak up in the name of justice, to love, to nurture, to bridge difference. Thank God for those who will show us the way, like Samuel, like Jesus.

In Mark 4 Jesus says the Kingdom of God "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."⁸ In God's care we can grow our faith, our love for God and one another as God's beloved children. This love can grow strong enough to stretch to offer shelter to all who need it, just like a sheltering tree. God has given us plenty. There is abundance. We need not shrink back in fear of not having enough, of not wanting to share with those who are less fortunate.

You know, in the Bible, generally if things are repeated, we're meant to pay attention. In the two parables we have today—that of the growing seed and the mustard seed—the emphasis is on the repeated words "sown" and "earth/on the ground." The focus is on the ground itself. The seed can become shelter only when it is planted in the ground—thus "God's kingdom is compared to this transformative, productive earth."⁹ God is truly the best earth we can plant ourselves in—God is the great "Nurture-er."

We refrain from engaging the binary of Mother's Day, Father's Day, not because we don't appreciate, but because we do appreciate those who raise and care for our children, but our affirmations draw the circles wider to include the village that helps us become who we are. Or, put into another metaphor:

[T]he Aristotlean 'opposition' of night/day does not take into accord the varied light of sunrise, or the ways in which a day, darkened by storm, can take on the appearance of night, or how an Alaska night sky can appear as bright as a North Carolina afternoon. Just a simple exploration of the assumed night/day binary shows how polarity is assumed, not

⁸ Mark 4:31-32

⁹ Mary Ann Tolbert, "Mark," in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, ed. Walter J. Harrelson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1815.

real. We can do the same with white/black, male/female, life/death; I cannot think of a binary that does not hold intricate contradictions and complexities.¹⁰

Look, I'm desperate to build bridges, to get out of the binary, to remember our basic human decency, and throw "us/them" out the window. Remember that the in-between is beautiful, friends, and that we can meet there in the fields where God will nurture us and help us grow together.

So in the name of the God who made us, created us, nurtures and sustains us, let us celebrate those who do the same for us, and then let us model that Holy Love to all who would meet us at the borders of our lives. Amen.

¹⁰ Tema Okun, "The Emperor Has No Clothes: Teaching About Race and Racism to People Who Don't Want to Know" (Dissertation, UNC Greensboro, 2010), accessed June 15, 2018, <http://choicereviews.org/review/10.5860/CHOICE.49-2213>.