

JUNE 16, 2024

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

June 9 sermon— ‘Heroes and Villains : Saul’ 1 Samuel 15:16-23

This week in our Heroes and Villains series we are looking at the first king of Israel, Saul. I think most would consider him a villain. He did a lot of villainous things in his reign. Though he wasn't all bad, no one typically is. In 1 Samuel we see that in his role as king he had a very particular role and duty. He was to protect and defend Israel from her enemies. As Saul is described early in his reign we are told that he did well in this regard. That said, trying to spear his own son and David several times to a wall seems villainous. David, who had only done well by Saul through his lyre playing and military victories, was hounded by Saul throughout the kingdom. Trying to kill someone who's done nothing wrong to you is villainous.

Even so, if we consider the fullness of Saul's story there is something we can take from it that is incredibly critical if we are to live faithfully before God.

Before Saul was anointed king Israel was a mess. Judges bears this out as the chapters progress. They are spiritually chaotic. They are at best a loose, chaotic confederation of tribes rather than a nation. And amidst all the mess over and over we read in Judges “and there was no king in Israel.” Perhaps because of this Israel asked for an earthly king. The King they couldn't see or touch wasn't working out. Not because God wasn't interested in Israel. It was more Israel wasn't interested in following God. Other nations must have at least seemed somewhat orderly. They all rallied under a king. So they asked for one. Samuel wasn't happy with this request. He gave them all kinds of reasons why this was a bad idea. Abandon the faithful, loving God who has always watched over them for a human, fallible king who would put their sons to military service, take their daughters to fill positions in the court, tax the mess out of them, and all kinds of other issues? It's absurd! Yet they still wanted a king. God said “give them one, and I'll show you who it is.”

In Saul we see someone who honestly is unremarkable. His distinctive features are being tall and good looking. This might work well for a model, but it's no real qualifications for a king. We first see him sent on a mission by his father to track down some escaped, wayward donkeys. He goes with a servant. After a time looking he says to the servant that they need to return because his dad will start worrying about their safety. The servant tells Saul that there is a man of God in a nearby town and they could go ask him for advice. Saul's response? “We don't have any food or money and you're supposed to offer a gift if you ask something of the man of God.”

Saul knew he was headed out on a search of unknown duration. He didn't think to bring enough food or to bring money just in case. This isn't impressive. The servant has more sense. He at least has some money!

The man of God they find is none other than Samuel, and he's been waiting for them. He's already gotten a word from God that the king would be arriving that day and he'd know him when he saw him. Samuel has already done the customary traditional acts to usher in a new king. He's made a sacrifice to the Lord and prepared a feast. He tells Saul that the donkeys are back, his family is fine, and he's to accompany him to the “high place”, which is a place of some form of honor and worship. When they get there Saul goes from Saul the donkey hunter to Saul the honored guest and new king of Israel.

Take a moment and think about Saul here. He has no idea this is coming. He wasn't looking for it. He has no role model in Israel because he's the first king. He has no court, no palace, no army, no infrastructure to work with, no advisors, nothing. He's flying blind and seemingly not the brightest bulb in the socket. This has to be bewildering, terrifying, and an amount of pressure not one of us can fathom.

He's sent home. Where do we find him next? Plowing a field. Saul has returned to what he knows. Nothing has been set up. He's moved to rally a military victory in the meantime. And then Samuel organizes an official gathering to “figure out” who the king is. Saul knows. Samuel

knows. So why do this whole process of drawing lots? They draw lots to find the tribe, to find the clan in the tribe, the family in the clan, and the person in the family. This seems like a lot of work when the answer is already given. Yet it makes perfect sense. In God's wisdom it's known to be a better idea to demonstrate that God has selected the king rather than just risk it looking like Samuel picked someone on his own accord. It's politics, but it's wise. Of course the lot falls on Saul.

Where is Saul to be found? Hiding in the luggage... That's right, hiding. And here we begin to get a glimpse into Saul's mind. Why would he hide? He doesn't want the job! He doesn't feel worthy. If they can't find him maybe they will pick someone else. Saul has an issue with confidence and insecurity.

His first major blunder comes when Samuel tells him to wait until a particular day for him to arrive and offer a sacrifice before Saul and his troops go into battle. This was customary to ask God's favor on the battle ahead. It's the midnight hour and still no Samuel. Saul's men are leaving, likely because they won't go unless the sacrifice is offered. Saul has no idea what the delay is about, but he DOES know that he's got a battle to fight and dwindling troops. So he offers the sacrifice.

Of course that's when Samuel arrives and scolds Saul. The consequence is that his family will not sit on the throne after him. His legacy is done.

I don't know that we should be too hard on Saul. Yes, the end result was disobedience, but how many of us would have done the same thing? Samuel could have been mugged or killed on the road and he had men who needed encouraging and uplifting from this sacrifice. He may have made the wrong decision, but I think we can extend a measure of sympathy and grace that we can see why he may have made that choice.

His next blunder that gets him rejected reveals more depth to Saul's inner workings. He's told to completely wipe out the Amalekites. They do...kind of. He takes the king and parades him back and also returns with a bunch of livestock (he'd been told to destroy all the animals). Samuel questions him and he doesn't have great answers. For the animals he says that "the people" wanted to keep them and they would offer some as a sacrifice to God. Samuel's response is the famous question "what does God delight more in? Sacrifice or obedience?" Of course obedience is the answer. But these two details show us something.

Why would Saul bring the king back? The king is a trophy. It shows off for the people he's called to lead but doesn't feel up to the job. It is an attempt to gain their favor and praise. It's overcoming insecurity.

Why does he take the animals and listen to the people? He's people pleasing. He wants to be liked and have their favor. How better to do this than listen to their requests, even if it goes against God's command?

It is clear that Saul's lack of confidence and insecurity is a deadly and damaging combination. They override his willingness to follow God because he'd rather gain the people's favor. This is not the making of a good king for God's people. Generations after we see king after king who also does the same and refuses to listen to God. Saul is now rejected by God as king, though he reigns for quite a long time after despite this.

God's favor or Spirit departs from Saul that had come to rest on him as he is anointed king. The scripture then says that "God sent an evil spirit to torment Saul". This is a strange phrasing because we know that this is not in God's character. God revealed in Jesus is never about pushing people down a wrong or bad road. Fortunately if we look into it we realize that this turn of phrase wasn't literally indicating God sending a spirit. It was how the described someone who was unstable, or erratic. When they would have an episode it was being "tormented by a spirit." This is why they requested music as a remedy. They believed that when someone went into a state that music would have a calming effect.

This again isn't surprising. How many of us use music to help us calm down or move forward when we are feeling overly emotional? Sad, frustrated, angry, all of this people use music to settle down.

The turn of phrase is likely describing that Saul had some kind of mental illness causing him to deteriorate.

Put this in tandem with his insecurity and lack of confidence and suddenly we can understand why he became so hostile towards and jealous of David. David is getting all this praise. Rather than seeing this as an opportunity to say “look what a great job I did selecting the right man to lead my military!”, it is a threat to him because he already doesn’t see himself as worthy for the role.

Is Saul a villain? Sure. Can we see him more sympathetically? I say yes. This is a man racked with a sense of unworthiness and likely battling an illness of the mind for which there was no understanding or cure. In ancient history many leaders who did horrible things have been understood in light of modern discovery to have suffered from untreated illness. Illness of the mind and/or physical illnesses that affected the mind. We can both see his deeds as wrong, bad, some maybe even evil, and have compassion for the circumstances that drove him to those deeds.

It is in this that we can draw a valuable lesson.

Some people do bad, downright horrifying and evil things. Genocide, murder, theft, defrauding people without conscience, all forms of abuse, and on and on. Consequences exist for a reason. To protect themselves and the community from their warped values and bad acting they need to be removed from the general population, hopefully to rehabilitate. As terrible it is to take someone’s freedom, there are times when it’s the only recourse.

The problem comes when we see these people as scum, beyond grace, and deserving the worst of punishments. When we see them with no grace or compassion. Lock them away. That’s not enough. Because if there is no treatment, the likelihood of repeating the offense skyrockets. Hoping that having been to prison is enough of a deterrent may not be enough. There is a life history that forged who someone came to be. Why they do what they do, think what they think, and believe what they believe. It’s in unpacking that where a new path that is healthier and correct is charted.

I remember when I was younger and working with delinquent populations. You’d hear stories and think “I’d never do that”. And then someone says “well you haven’t been through what they have.” And I’d still say “I’d still never do that.” How arrogant! I could only say that because I was still viewing things through the lens of the past that had formed me. Stable, loving home. Intact family. Never being in want. Raised in the church. Having access to good and furthered education. It didn’t occur to me that I’d have to look at it through the lens of someone with none of that and a host of other negatives to all of my positives. And that’s impossible to do.

At the end of the day all of us have to acknowledge that were we subjected to the same traumas we might turn out no different than that person behind bars.

So here is my point. No matter who we come across that rubs us the wrong way, outright wrongs us, or ends up behind bars, we need to hold in our hearts a place that sees them not just for their deeds but for what cultivated them to be capable of it. It is never something wonderful and good that produces such a heart and such intentions. It is always pain. It is always harm. There is always woundedness that is at the heart of it all. We know that God looks on all of our woundedness with grace and compassion. God’s heart breaks at the pain inflicted on God’s children. All of them.

Seeing someone in their pain is so often what God uses to break through and help them find a better way. With the woman caught in adultery, Jesus didn’t see just the act, He saw the woman. When he encountered the demon possessed he didn’t just see their affect and action. He saw the affliction. In seeing the person and the affliction, we can begin to help heal wounds that may have gone untouched or unnoticed by anyone else. At the very least we can realize that when someone is taken off the streets and put in some form of prison, it’s not just about punishment or vengeance. It’s also an opportunity to provide services to help someone through their pain so that on the other side of incarceration it a chance at a new life filled with hope and purpose.

If our hearts are hard and cold, seeking only punishment, someone is released from their sentence with no treatment the real problem hasn’t been addressed. This is why the rate of people returning to their past behavior is as high as it is. Compassion sees the whole person and treats them as God’s beloved, looking to repair what has been broken.

Yes, we need to have consequences for bad action. We also need to remember that our goal should be healing, not causing more damage. Remember that we have a Savior who told us to love our

enemies. As He hung on the cross he looked at his murderers and said “forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing”. When we find compassion in our hearts, especially for the most heinous actions committed, we find the heart of Christ. This is a heart that is far more at peace with the world than a cold and calloused one. Because we see the world for it’s potential and at all costs try to help it reach and even overshoot that potential.