

**Scripture Lesson:** I Samuel 15:34-16:13*Pew Bible O.T. pg. 248*

<sup>34</sup>Then Samuel went to Ramah, and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul. <sup>35</sup>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. <sup>16:1</sup>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." <sup>2</sup>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.'" <sup>3</sup>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." <sup>4</sup>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?" <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>When they came, Samuel looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely his anointed is now before the Lord." <sup>7</sup>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." <sup>8</sup>Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." <sup>9</sup>Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." <sup>10</sup>Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen any of these." <sup>11</sup>Then 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." <sup>12</sup>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." <sup>13</sup>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. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

**Response to the Word**

L: This is the Word of God for the people of God

**P: Thanks be to God!**

I Samuel 15:34-16:13

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"The Lord Looks On the Heart"

Pastor Amy Terhune

The late Tim Russert wrote several books on fatherhood. I think my dad owned all of them. One was about Russert's own father. Another – entitled "Wisdom of our Fathers" – was a collection of letters and reflections that Russert received from readers across the world about their own fathers and experiences. One of those many letter-writers shared this story:

"A few years ago, I became the victim of a senseless, unprovoked act of violence that left several scars on my neck. I survived, and the assailant is in prison, but I will never really be the same. When I shave, I see one of the scars, and until recently, to see that scar was to trigger a visual memory of my assailant's rage-filled face.

"The obvious solution was to stop shaving, but that didn't work. I began to remember the terrible event with increasing vividness, until I finally sought help.

"My therapist's first question to me was, "Do you have a good relationship with your father?" I said, "Yes. We have a great relationship."

"The therapist asked if my father had taught me how to shave. Before I could answer, a memory I had forgotten for many, many years popped into my head, and I smiled.

'Doctor,' I replied, 'this is so cool! I remember standing at my dad's side as a little boy, watching him shave. So my dad bought me a little toy razor, with a little knob on the bottom of the handle that opened the top, just like his. The blade was a piece of cardboard that looked like a razor blade. Dad would smear a little shaving cream all over my face and I got to shave with my dad.'

"My therapist then suggested that I think of this happier memory every time I shaved, to displace the memory of the attack.

"Which, with time, I have done. Now, when I shave, I feel the love my dad showed me, and I also remember what it felt like to be innocent. My shaving memory marked the start of a long journey best described as posttraumatic growth.

"Precious memories are made in an instant and last forever. I am so thankful that my dad had the patience back then to let me "shave." That memory has not only strengthened an already strong relationship, but what made me happy then has enabled me to rediscover happiness now. Bless you, Dad." [previous story adapted from Billy D. Strayhorn, *From the Pulpit*, CSS Publishing Company, Inc, illustrations for Father's Day on [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

I am touched by that story. Memories are powerful, and dads can have a lasting impact. I'm aware as I say this that for some, indeed for many, today is a difficult day. Family relationships are not always life-giving, and when there is brokenness, we grieve. As we turn to our scripture lesson this morning, we meet an interesting assortment of father-figures, all of whom, figure large in Israel's life and history. Our lesson today marks a turning point in first book of Samuel. But let's briefly remember our history.

For centuries, God was father, king, and ruler of Israel. But at some point, the people got antsy and they asked God to appoint a human king like other nations around them. God was rightly offended by this, but ultimately acquiesced, and sent his prophet Samuel to anoint Saul as king in Chapter 10. By the end of Chapter 15, Saul has fallen out of favor. Why? Because God order Saul to go in and annihilate the Amalekites—all the men, all the women, all the children, all the livestock. To be fair, they've done a lot of harm to the Israelites over the years, but still.... That's pretty harsh. If such bloodthirsty commands bother you, join the club. It bothers me, too. I won't explain it away, because I can't faithfully do that. It's there in scripture to be reckoned with. What I can tell you is that 10 centuries after David, a king and savior arose from David's lineage who said, "pray for your enemies, love your enemies, care for your enemies." He also said, "love your neighbor as yourself", and when pressed to identify who that neighbor was, Jesus was pretty clear that we'll never meet another human being who is *not* our neighbor. Martin Luther King Jr famously said once that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice. How did he know that? Because he knew his scripture. He saw the arc of morality slowly bend across the centuries covered in scripture towards justice, compassion, love, grace, peace. And if nothing else, our task today is to place ourselves in God's hands, obedient to Christ's call, that God might use us to shape that arc, day by day, millimeter by millimeter, until the Reign of God is established on earth as it is in heaven.

But back to the story at hand. Saul is ordered to annihilate the Amalekites. Which he does. All the men (except 1), all the women, all the children, but not quite all the livestock. Saul kept some of the good animals and he kept King Agog. And this really raises Samuel's dander. Apparently, if you're going to annihilate a people, you're not supposed to profit from it by keeping good livestock. And you're not supposed to bring the king back and publicly humiliate him before you execute him. Which is disturbing, yes, but at least gives us some insight into Saul's character, and might help us understand

why the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel. It seems that Saul is not so much into God as he is into stuff and glory. And what happens when a leader becomes consumed with greed and power? The Spirit leaves him. That's what the scripture tells us – the Spirit of God can't find room within Saul anymore, and Saul is left in an inward state of chaos where he can't find peace or true joy or loving connection with others. It's a tragic story of the wages of sin, of greed, of arrogance.

No wonder, then, that the prophet Samuel grieves. He took a risk on Saul. He invested in him, prayed for him, worked with him, tried his best to help him shepherd the people. And it's all come unraveled. Samuel's friend, his partner, his king has gone down a very different path, fallen away from the one true God, made some terrible choices, become someone unrecognizable. Samuel is heartbroken.

And God is decidedly unsympathetic: How long are you gonna grieve over that turncoat? I'm sorry you're upset, but we've still got a nation to worry about, so fill your horn with oil, tie up your sandals, and get yourself on down to Bethlehem. We're going to anoint one of Jesse's boys.

And I'm guessing here, but Samuel's probably thinking to himself: who? Jesse? Jesse? Oooohhhh yeah – the grandson of Boaz and that Moabite woman. His family tree is not exactly pedigree, Lord. And he's got a modest place down there, but nothing special. He's not in charge of anything. One of Jesse's boys? Really?

But here's the thing about Samuel. He listens. All those decades ago, when he was just a little boy serving Eli in the Temple, the Lord called Samuel and on Eli's instructions, Samuel said: speak Lord, for your servant is listening. Samuel has not stopped listening since. Indeed, his name – Samuel – may well reference the Hebrew verb Shema "to hear". And when I say listen, I don't mean in one ear and out the other. He listens and obeys. He hears. He does what he's told. God says "go", so Samuel goes.

And when he finally gets there, and everyone gathers for the worship service, Samuel gets a good look at Jesse's boy Eliab. Tall, handsome, broad-shouldered. Definite king material. A little sprucing up, some fancy armor, a bit of training in rhetoric, and this could work. Until God says "nope!"

Seven sons all pass before Samuel, and not one of them is God's choice. Not one of them has the heart God's looking for. No, no, no, no, no, no, no. So Jesse sends for the youngest, shepherding the flock out in the fields. And if you're an astute reader of the biblical record, a little bell should ding inside of you someplace. Ah, that's the one. Because God's best leaders are always shepherds. They lead the flock, care for the flock, protect the flock, even sacrifice for the good of the flock. Not that you can tell at this juncture. He's still a kid, eighth in line, comes in smelling like sheep, kind of cute in a boy-band sort of way, his voice hovering between soprano and bass on any given sentence, no whiskers yet, a little acne still evident if you get close, but God sees what he will be. God sees a heart with the spiritual courage to persevere, the political courage to lead in turbulent times, and the moral courage to own his sin. David will face heartache and suffering. He will know great joy, great love, and great fear. And he will mess up bigtime. But no matter what his circumstance, David will never give up on God. And God knows it, can see it in his heart.

Centuries later, in his sermon on the mountain in Chapter 6 of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus warns his disciples not to be consumed with greed or worry or control over things. He tells us to be generous, to trust God, and to serve faithfully, for in this way, we store up for ourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves cannot break in and steal. And then Jesus adds these powerful words: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Which teaches an invaluable lesson: as God's creations, endowed with free will, we have some responsibility for the condition of our hearts. Feed the heart with the Word, with goodness, with hope, with faith, with love, extend the benefit of the doubt, see God in others, and your heart is exercised to

stay in love with God. But feed it with negativity, despair, bleakness, and fear, and pretty soon, we're suspicious of others, jealous, angry, and hurting.

The other day, I was heading home right at rush hour about 5pm from downtown. I turned from Michigan Avenue onto Gratiot, and there was a ton of traffic, cars in front of me and behind me as far as I could see. As soon as Gratiot widened into two lanes in front of the old White Castle, I got into the right lane, which is where I should be if I'm going to the church. Then I realized: I'm going home, I'm not going to the church. I need to be in the left lane. So as soon as I passed where Brockway breaks off, I put on my turn signal and tried to get over into the left lane. Nobody would let me in. I went nearly a mile with my blinker on. Finally, near the golf course, I tried to get over, and a lady in a red sedan honked, and sped up to keep me from coming over, glaring at me as she went by. So I tapped my breaks a bit and managed to sneak in behind her, in front of a green pickup truck. The guy in the pickup honked at me, whizzed around me on the right, and flipped me off for good measure as he drove on by. By this time, I'm incensed. Why are people so mean? Why won't anybody let me in? I got home, but I was hot under the collar, spitting fire about the meanness of today's drivers. Brad agreed with me that there's a lot of meanness out there on the road. But then he added, "but you never know what those other people went through today. If they weren't going to let you over, would it have really been so hard to turn right into the church, turn around, and come back to pull in the subdivision? What's the hurry? Why push in?" Well, that wasn't what I wanted to hear. But he was so right. I can't do anything about any other driver on the road. But I can control me. I don't have to get mean because they do. I don't have to get wound up because they are. What does it say about me that I have to get over, take the most direct route, and that I get spitting mad when people don't treat me as I think they should. The gracious among you will tell me: it says that you're human. Which is certainly true.

But I'll tell you what it says to me: it says that when I drive, I've gotten into a pattern of behavior that isn't kind and isn't good for me. I've allowed the sense of rush to infiltrate me. I've allowed myself to move from defensive driving to aggressive driving, and that's not who I want to be. So like the young man in the opening story, I need to go back to earlier memories, when driving was a joy and a privilege. I need to remember the seriousness my parents impressed on me when I was sixteen – that a car is a great tool, but if I'm not in control of my emotions behind the wheel, I could cause an accident that could hurt or kill another. When I listen to the heart – the part of me that is made in God's image, I remember who I am and who I want to be in the world. I remember what matters. And I can better let go of what really doesn't.

Friends, like David, we are all unlikely vessels of God's grace in the world. The Lord looks on the heart – all of it: the good, the bad, and the ugly. And the Lord sees our best selves. God sees one for whom the Good Shepherd was willing to lay down his life. Knowing, then, what God sees in you, what do you see? What do you treasure? Where is your heart? Who do you want to be in the world? Will you let God into your heart? Will you let God use you to bend society towards justice? As I often do, I'll have to leave those questions with you. Amen.