

June 10, 2018

Title: What Kind of Leader

Scripture: 1 Samuel 8:4-20, 11:14-15

Mark 3:20-21, 31-35

Last week's young boy Samuel heard God calling to him and he responded, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." About 20 years later, Samuel became the judge and priestly leader of the Israelites. It was a time of instability and their safety was often in danger from the Philistines. Samuel continued to pray for the people and during the time that Samuel was leader, they were mostly safe from invasion.

When Samuel got old, he appointed his sons to serve as Israel's judges but, unfortunately, they did not follow in Samuel's footsteps. The scriptures tell us that "They tried to turn a profit, they accepted bribes, and they perverted justice." That's where today's Scripture reading picked up.

The elders got together, went to Samuel, and demanded that he appoint a king to rule over them, "like all the other nations have." I get it that they don't trust Samuel's sons. They were already showing that they were not going to be the same kind of leader as Samuel has been. They were going to be looking out for themselves, rather than for the good of the community.

For all their history the Jewish people had been loosely organized tribes with God as their real leader. They were supposed to be God's people; people set apart to be different than the nations around them. But in their anxiety, in their concern for the stability of their system of government, they confronted God's prophet Samuel and insisted that he give them a king "like other nations."

The people looked to what they saw as a more ordered and centralized system – a monarchy. Since Samuel was no longer fit to rule, and they didn't trust his sons, they thought that a king would solve all their problems. When faced with this demand, Samuel did what he always did; he sought guidance from God. God made it clear that this was not so much a rejection of Samuel as it was really a rejection of God.

It was one more example of humans trying to take control over their lives, looking for the easy solution, forgetting what God had done for them and unwilling to live in the uncertainty of life. They were forgetting that God had led them out of slavery in Egypt and had given them food in the desert. They were forgetting that God had brought them to the Promised Land. They wanted to be like their neighbors. They thought that if they had a king, he would be responsible for their safety. A king would be the one to govern them, make all the important decisions, and organize and lead any military defenses necessary. By the way, it also means that the king could be blamed if anything went wrong.

Samuel warned them about the realities of having a king including the pitfalls. He reminded them that while good governments care about what is best for the people, all governments are ultimately concerned about their own self-interest and maintaining their power. Sadly, Samuel knew about this first hand – Eli's sons and now his own sons had put their own interests ahead of the needs of the people.

Ironically, the same people who were concerned about the actions of Samuel's sons, couldn't imagine that a king could do the same. Their minds were made up. They wanted to be like other nations. The attractions of order, security and military conquest outweighed the potential loss of civil liberties and domestic comforts.

Samuel's words would prove to be true. The long list of kings that would follow would include some kings who were good, some who were mediocre and others who were terrible. When the Bible talks about each of these kings, the summary statement is usually either "He did what was evil in the Lord's eyes" or "He did what was right in the Lord's eyes". It is a vivid reminder that all governments, all actions, all people are viewed through the lenses of whether or not they, we, do what is good or evil in the eyes of God.

It is a reminder that our primary identity is as children of God; that our primary place of belonging is with God. Throughout history there have always been prophets and others who were called to speak truth to power, to hold kings and other rulers accountable. We, too, as followers of Jesus are called to be good citizens. It is important that we are informed about what is happening around us. It is important that we vote, that some of us run for office, that we write letters or emails to leaders, that we place phone calls, that we hold leaders accountable and that we insist that our government – that any government – include the most vulnerable in its plans for care, health, and safety.

As followers of Jesus, we seek to do what is good in the eyes of God. Whether we realize it or not, we are all leaders in one way or another, whether it is in our places of employment, among our family and friends. There are always people watching us and observing how we are living. We hope and pray that we will live and lead in ways that witness to the good that God is calling us to do.

In our Gospel, today, we find Jesus in the middle of doing God's work. Earlier in the chapter, he has been busy healing and teaching. Immediately before our reading, he had entered a house hoping for some

quiet. A crowd gathered again so that it was impossible for him and his followers even to eat. Into this busyness, came Jesus mother and brothers. They had heard about what Jesus is doing. They had also heard about the way the religious authorities were challenging Jesus. In the section of the Gospel that we didn't read this morning, the scribes came to Jesus and accused him of being Satan, of being a demon and said that it was because of this that he was able to cast out demons.

It's a common tactic employed by humans. When we are opposed to what someone else is doing, it is easy to label them in some way that makes them less than human, less worthy of our consideration. The scribes didn't like what Jesus was doing; it didn't fit into their categories – so he must be sidelined. They didn't like even the unofficial leadership that Jesus was providing. They labeled him in such a way that they hoped that people would no longer take him seriously.

When we label someone or a group of people, then all the evidence we see will simply confirm our beliefs. We will be blind to the truth. So if they could convince themselves and others that Jesus was controlled by Satan, then it would also justify them doing anything they wanted to control him, to contain him, to silence him.ⁱ

But Jesus didn't respond in kind. He didn't immediately lash out with a label for the scribes. He didn't engage in name calling, or any other behavior that would have diminished who they were.

“There is no middle way, for the world today as for Israel then. Jesus isn't just a ‘mildly interesting historical figure’, as some in today's world would like him to be (another label, please note, designed to neutralize Jesus and keep him out of harm's way). He is either the one who brought God's kingdom, or a dangerous madman.”ⁱⁱ

Those of us who live by Jesus' message must be on the alert for opposition of all sorts, sometimes subtle, sometimes threatening and we must learn how to respond. If we label Jesus as simply a 'mildly interesting historical figure' then we are trying to make ourselves just like everyone else, just as those who begged Samuel for a king were doing.

Jesus' family, in some respect, also wanted to be just like everyone else. They heard about what Jesus was doing. They may have been concerned for his health since he was too busy even to eat, but likely they were also concerned for themselves as a family. Families in the Western world often anticipate that our children will not live near us. We anticipate that members of families will find jobs in different locations, marry someone, move away, and that we will gather as families only on special occasions.

This was not the case for families in Jesus' day. Children (or sons) would grow up and marry and often live in the family home and be part of the family business. For Jews, the close family bond was part of the God-given fabric of thinking and living.

When his mother and brothers arrived and wanted to bring him home where they could take care of him, where they could control him, where they could stop him from behaving in such an outrageous manner and bringing dishonor to the family name, Jesus asked, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?"

Depending upon the commentator I read, there are many different ways of looking at his question and his following statement. He looked at those who were sitting around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

I choose to go with the commentators who hear this not as a sharp break with family – remember that as Jesus hung on the cross dying, he looked at his mother and at his disciple John and told them that they were now mother and son. John would be the one to take care of Mary after Jesus' death. I hear this not as a rejection of family, but as a larger inclusion of family.

When we live as Jesus' disciples, our family expands, and includes a new solidarity with all of humanity. When we are followers of Jesus, we weep with those who weep. We rejoice with those who rejoice. This is one of the reasons that we take the time at the beginning of our worship to share our joys and concerns. This is why we care about what happens to people we have never met. They, too, are our brothers and sisters.

This principle was difficult for the Jews and the Jewish Christians to understand, but it was important for the early church to remember as the basis for its Gentile mission. It was the empowering motive that sent the early church out to share the good news. It was the empowering motive that sent the earliest church out as a marching order to care for those in need.

This principle is important for us today. It still comes to us as our marching orders, but also as an invitation to reach out and be connected with God's children wherever and whoever they may be. It is still important for us today, to realize and to remember that we are not designed to be just like everyone else.

Certainly, we learn from our families, our neighbors, our friends, but the problem in Samuel was that the people of God had forgotten what God had done for them. When things seemed uncertain, they begged for what

they thought would be the security of a monarchy that they believed would make everything good for them again.

It is still common today for us to want to look to someone else to make things better for us. In one sense, it is part of what we do when we vote for the person or political party who we think or hope will make things better. Hopefully, we do so with clarity about what we value, and with an understanding that things are never as simple as we would like them to be.

Like the people of Samuel's day, "we fall prey to the same temptation when we let our neighbors' choices become our plumb line. When the fearmongers convince us that the stranger is our enemy, and that persons different from us are potential threats, we reject God. When we believe that we come first and allow the poor to fend for themselves we reject God. When we believe that forgiveness is naïve, and mercy is for fools, we reject God. We reject God because we forget what God has done for us. We reject God because we forget that our very existence is a divine gift."ⁱⁱⁱ

The question before each of us, every day is what kind of leader do we want to follow, what kind of leader do we want to be? Will we look for and grasp at the easy answer without thinking about the ramifications and how our decisions either help us follow and do God's will or turn our back on God's will? Will Jesus be able to look at each of us, and call us brother or sister because we are doing the will of God?

ⁱ Wright, Tom. Mark for Everyone p. 37

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Upper Room Disciplines 2018 p.193