

The One Out Keeping the Sheep

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Psalm 20; 1 Samuel 15:34 – 16:13

Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

June 13, 2021

1 Samuel 16, which may not be one of the most familiar Bible passages, has been one of my favorite stories for a long time. When the great judge Samuel comes to the little town of Bethlehem to anoint the 2nd king of Israel – an anointing which was actually a treasonous act of rebellion against the 1st king who was currently occupying the throne – Samuel meets Jesse and his sons. This is Jesse of whom Isaiah 11 says that a “shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,” he of whom the great Christmas song, “Lo How a Rose E’er Blooming” sings that the Messiah is “of Jesse’s lineage coming.” That Jesse.

Then Samuel sits there, while Jesse brings his sons out, one by one. First comes Eliab, and Samuel is blown away. “Surely the Lord’s anointed is now before the Lord.” But he was not the one. Then comes Abinadab. He, too, was impressive, but alas, “Neither has the Lord chosen this one.” Then comes Shammah. Another hunk of a man. But “neither has the Lord chosen this one.” Jesse, the text says, “made seven of his sons pass before Samuel.” You may know that seven is the biblical number for completeness, so that all seven sons would have been a cipher for “all the sons you could want.” But Samuel says, to what must have been a disappointed Jesse, “The Lord has not chosen any of these.” “Are there any more?”

And Jesse says, somewhat dismissively, “Well there remains yet the youngest, but he is out keeping the sheep.” You can almost hear the embarrassment in his voice, and you can imagine the disdainful looks on the elder brothers’ faces. “Bring him,” Samuel says. And so they send and bring in the little one.

And when the little one walks in, you can feel the air rush out of the room, the narrator practically gasps, and then the Lord says to Samuel, “Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.” Then, and only then, do we learn the name of this chosen one. “The spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.” And so begins the Bible’s fascination with David, the shepherd king of Israel, who would become the ancestor of the shepherd king Jesus.

It’s such a good story.

But more than being a really good story, this narrative embodies one of the core biblical principles by which the community of faith has always been organized, and which we can continually forget. It is the principle of inversion, the principle of the upside-down kingdom, by which the stone that was rejected becomes the chief

cornerstone (as we find it in Psalm 118), by which the first will be last, and the last will be first (as we find it in the words of Jesus), by which God has a peculiar affinity with the "least of these" in the eyes of the world.

The world routinely gravitates towards those who have great achievement and wealth and power and intelligence. But God chooses those who are small and weak and poor. The world chooses those who are impressive and who are winners. God chooses those who are poor in spirit and who are losers. "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" the religious elites asked of Jesus. Jesus replied, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

What kind of God does this? What kind of God comes to the draft, and chooses the little one out keeping the sheep, leaving on the table the charismatic, impressive older brothers who could surely get a lot more done?

This is a great story. Why does God work this way? Why does God work through the rejected ones, the smallest ones, the least, the last, the loser, the failures? This God, the God of the Bible, moves like baptismal water, always flowing to the lowest point. God does this in the world, and God does this in us. We spend so much of our energy trying to put forth a good front, trying to put on a mask of competence and prowess and impressiveness. Meanwhile, God's grace is flowing towards our lowest points, moving towards the parts of us that are failures and that are undeveloped and that are broken.

God does this because that is how everything and everyone gets included. A religion of achievement, a religion of ascent, of performance, of the winners, is always going to leave a lot of people out. A lot of people get left behind in religions of glory.

But a religion of the cross, a religion of forgiveness, a religion of the least and the little includes everyone. No one is left out, except for those who cannot stand to be seen with a bunch of failures and misfits. We can choose, like the elder brother in the parable, to stay outside of the party, but Jesus is going to be throwing down with the little ones.

There is an important word here for those of us who are Presbyterians, including those of us here at Lewinsville. In many ways, Presbyterians tend to be fairly impressive people. As a tribe, Presbyterians are highly educated, fairly affluent, and often quite powerful. We may even think that our impressiveness is the best thing about us. But what we know is that every one of us has had some experience of being dismissed or ignored or overlooked or forgotten in some way. Maybe it happened in our families of origin, maybe it happened in our childhoods, maybe it happened in school or at work in some way, but along the way, all of us have had some experience of being dismissed for some reason.

There can be a deep temptation to want to bury those experiences, to get past them, to forget about those painful experiences. I know I want to get away from them.

But from a missional, kingdom of God perspective, the tender places of being overlooked and dismissed can be pure gold, when we hold them and accept them. That is the tender place from which your most compassionate, inclusive mission and ministry will grow. Our achievements and impressive credentials will not change and heal the world. Your capacity to heal always comes from your wounds. Your capacity to heal is so much more beautiful and more durable than your capacity to impress, even though it costs you so much more.

When we read the long story of King David, we can see that when David lived from his own place of smallness, when he was in touch with his experiences of rejection, he was a radiant king who drew people of all kinds of people to him. And when he forgot about his smallness, when he began to think that he was a Big and Important Guy, that's when he fell into the controlling ways of a tyrant who committed grievous abuse of power against Bathsheba and her husband Uriah.

Who are the people you are tempted to dismiss and ignore? Who are the people that you are inclined to overlook, to treat like the ones who are out keeping the sheep? What royal wonders are you overlooking by doing this? And in your own life, when have you been ignored and rejected and dismissed? If you're like me, you don't enjoy thinking of those experiences because they can bring back a kind of embarrassment and shame. Are there parts of yourself that you are inclined to dismiss, parts you'd like to leave behind, parts of yourself that you're ashamed of?

The God of the Bible, the God of Jesus Christ, is a God of small things and small people. God makes kings and queens out of little, insignificant people that the world overlooks. As you go through your week, see if you can notice where your attention goes. See if it automatically goes towards the big people in the room, in the neighborhood, towards the power players and the achievers. See if you can consciously notice the people and the parts of yourself standing on the edges, the ones who are being overlooked. That may be where God's anointing is taking place. To God be all the glory. Amen.