

Sunday, March 26, 2017

Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift
Seeing to the Heart of Leadership

1 Samuel 16:1-13 & Ephesians 5:8-13

INTRODUCTION TO THE 1 SAMUEL READING

Across many years, *after* Abraham, Moses, and Joshua, certain exceptional people, such as Samson and Deborah, arose as charismatic leaders for the diverse, loosely-connected Hebrew tribes. These leaders were known as “Judges.”

But the people looked at the nations around them with envy and got the idea that they wanted rulers like *they* had. They cried out for a King. A running argument developed with God over royal leadership, because, many *truly* felt that “*God was King enough!*”

Nevertheless, God relented and gave them what they asked for, using the prophet Samuel – (you might remember the little boy under the care of Eli at Shiloh who said, “Speak, Lord, for your servant listens?”) – the adult Samuel anointed Saul as the first king of Israel.

Over time, tragedy, military defeats, and corruption got the better of King Saul. It seemed clear to most that he was no longer able to continue as King. Sadly, he lost favor with the people and with God. Samuel knew that something had to change, but what? And who? He began to look for the next leader of the Hebrew nation.

I’m reading from the Common English Bible.

READING:

The Lord said to Samuel, “How long are you going to grieve over Saul? I have rejected him as king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and get going. I’m sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem because I have found my next king among his sons.”

“How can I do that?” Samuel asked. “When Saul hears of it he’ll kill me!”

“Take a heifer with you,” the Lord replied, “and say, ‘I have come to make a sacrifice to the Lord.’ Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will make clear to you what you should do. You will anoint for me the person I point out to you.”

Samuel did what the Lord instructed. When he came to Bethlehem, the city elders came to meet him. They were shaking with fear. “Do you come in peace?” they asked.

“Yes,” Samuel answered. “I’ve come to make a sacrifice to the Lord. Now make yourselves holy, then come with me to the sacrifice.” Samuel made Jesse and his sons holy and invited them to the sacrifice as well.

When they arrived, Samuel looked at Eliab and thought that must be the Lord’s anointed right in front.

But the Lord said to Samuel, “Have no regard for his appearance or stature, because I haven’t selected him. God doesn’t look at things like humans do. Humans see only what is visible to the eyes, but the Lord sees into the heart.”

Next Jesse called for Abinadab, who presented himself to Samuel, but he said, “The Lord hasn’t chosen this one either.” So Jesse presented Shammah, but Samuel said, “No, the Lord hasn’t chosen this one.” Jesse presented seven of his sons to Samuel, but Samuel said to

Jesse, "The Lord hasn't picked any of these." Then Samuel asked Jesse, "Is that all of your boys?"

There is still the youngest one," Jesse answered, "but he's out keeping the sheep." "Send for him," Samuel told Jesse, "because we can't proceed until he gets here."

So Jesse sent and brought him in. He was reddish brown, had beautiful eyes, and was good-looking. The Lord said, "That's the one. Go anoint him." So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him right there in front of his brothers. The Lord's spirit came over David from that point forward.

Then Samuel left and went to Ramah.

INTRODUCTION TO THE EPHESIANS READING:

Last Sunday, Bob preached from the letter to the Ephesians concerning the nature of the church as "the household of God" – a community of inclusion and reconciliation.

This week, we revisit Paul's letter – a later chapter – and it comes across that in their time, deception and falsehoods dominated the society around the church. It was hard to tell what was true and false, and this environment was negatively affecting the church. Always keen for the growth of Christians in the gospel, and easily given to offering advice, we hear again from the apostle.

I'm also reading from the Common English Bible.

READING:

You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord, so live your life as children of light.

Light produces fruit that consists of every sort of goodness, justice, and truth.

Therefore, test everything to see what's pleasing to the Lord, and don't participate in the unfruitful actions of darkness. Instead you should reveal the truth about them...

Everything exposed to the light is revealed by the light. Everything that is revealed by the light is light.

Verse ten again, this time from the New Revised Standard Version:

Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord.

SERMON:

It was June 14, 1775, after the battles of Lexington and Concord. George Washington, the farmer from Mt. Vernon, put on a military uniform and appeared before the Second Continental Congress. He wanted to signal that he was ready for the job of commander-in-chief, and the members must have thought he looked like a leader, for the next day, they selected him.

All of us have ideas about what leaders look like and what leadership is. We construct our guiding images from multiple sources, much from what we were taught growing up at home, school, and church, and especially from what we have experienced of good and bad bosses in the workplace! Our ideals about leadership are certainly influenced by the values of the cultural groups of which we are a part and from what we see national and global leaders doing, no matter the party, positive and negative. Our concept may also derive from what the latest experts are

writing about leadership. If you search Amazon, you'll get over 206,000 choices – it's a hot topic these days! – titles promoting different types, among them, "Entrepreneurial," "Servant," "Transactional," "Transformational," and something called "Level Five" leadership.

The Hebrew people had ideals about leadership too; they carried the distinctive belief that Yahweh, the Lord – the only God – was their leader, but at the time of this scripture passage, influenced by how other peoples were governed, they also thought a human king would be good – like the little girl who cried out for her mom during a terrible storm. Upon being told "God is with you," she replied: "I know, Mommy, but sometimes you just want someone with skin on."

The prophet Samuel shared the belief that God was the true king, and anointed Saul only upon discerning that this was okay with God. At the same time, he accepted certain prevailing social ideas: that leaders should be men, taller than the norm, and mighty warriors. They deserved loyalty from their subjects, and if all went well, would rule their entire lives, succeeded by their first-born.

We all carry ideas about leadership, but when we are given the awesome responsibility of selecting a *new* leader, especially for the church, then it becomes even more important to *examine* those assumptions.

For instance, over John Lombard's long pastorate, together with him, TriCon church undoubtedly developed certain patterns of behavior and ways of doing things, a manner of living church and a leadership style, to which all of you became accustomed. Without any reflection, you may assume things ought to simply stay the same, but *now* you have the opportunity *and the responsibility* to examine your habits and to evolve!

As another example, in 1979 when I was entering Lexington Theological Seminary in Kentucky – a school of theology in my home denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) – most all of the ministerial students became part-time pastors in surrounding congregations while they were enrolled. Butler Christian Church had attempted to support a full-time minister in the two years prior, but after misconduct on his part, returned to part-time, and Buster Moreland, the church board chair, called up the seminary to again secure a *student* pastor. Out of habit, Jack Reeve answered him with a list of incoming *male* students. Buster interrupted: "Do you got any girls up there?" Jack was taken off guard, but to his credit, quickly adjusted, and reflecting his true theological value of gender equality, he gave Buster *my* name. This was how I got my chance in pastoral ministry!

Samuel had to review and give up some of his original notions about how a search process to anoint a new king ought to unfold, and this wasn't necessarily comfortable for him. Verse one reveals that he was grieving over how things had turned out with Saul; maybe felt a bit guilty having given up on him as the leader of Israel, and God called him to work on that. He was uneasy keeping his mission to Bethlehem secret (vs 2) – It could've been viewed as treason – anointing someone entirely outside Saul's family and from a strange clan of farmers and shepherds. Can't you imagine, too, that it was somewhat embarrassing to go, Cinderella-like, through a line-up of Jesse's sons – "Don't you have any others?!" The whole procedure may have felt awkward to him.

The bigger geo-political picture added to his anxiety, I'm sure, because the balance of power in the region was at stake. The Philistines were always trying to absorb Israel, forcing the tribes to consolidate and centralize before they were ready to. At the point of our passage, they were making the path of leadership by walking it, and Samuel was right in the middle of this

dilemma, one with which I think TriCon can empathize: trying to ensure stability AND to change at the same time! If not Saul or the prince, *who* was the right person for the job?!

You see, Samuel was engaged in spiritual discernment, and in these verses we see the prophet struggling to understand God's direction. He's no longer acting as confidently as he had been in earlier chapters. It's more like he's fumbling around in the dark, reaching for a hand, looking for a light, and listening in the night. Don't you guess, he wished that all the mystery would go away and God would lead him by a straight, efficient highway?! I think of Joe Miller, the lawyer played by Denzel Washington in the movie *Philadelphia*; whenever the case got complicated, he'd say: "Now, explain it to me, like I'm a four-year-old."

As congregations go through transition and a pastoral search, it's common to feel discombobulated, and before all is said and done, you may get really tired of me talking about "spiritual discernment" – "practice spiritual discernment" – but ultimately, what spiritual discernment means is that, like Samuel, **you are trying to see beyond appearances and examine the assumptions you hold about leadership, in order to get to the heart of leadership, that is, to see the "heart" or inner person of the leader that God is preparing – the "heart" of the mission God is calling TriCon to carry out.** In other words, as you move through the spiritual discernment of Evolve 2017, the goal is to let God lead you to your mission first, and the leader second. Therefore, and this may surprise you: the main objective is *not* really to decide if it's Bob or not Bob; it's to perceive God's call for your particular mission – your WHY – and *then*, God's choice of a leader for you to that end. It's like threading a needle; it calls for concentration and focused attention, and the practice of spiritual discernment *will* become more concrete, I promise!

We don't know whether the members of the Continental Congress understood *their* deliberation to be an act of spiritual discernment. I'm not sure if they asked God's guidance or tried to see into George's heart as God would. But by God's grace, General Washington turned out to be the right President at the right time, one who even let go of power – he did not accept a third term – for the greater good of the nation! **But in Christ's church, seeing to the heart of leadership is to be the hallmark, not just a happy accident.** As Ephesians says in verse ten: "Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord." As Bob was talking about the nature of the church last Sunday, seeking God's choice and leaning in to listen with our whole being, is one of the traits that set the church apart from other groups. Spiritual discernment should be integral to who we are and what we do! Fortunately, the testimony of Samuel this morning is that we *can* indeed trust God to lead us one step at a time through the dim to the dawn.

Let us close this sermon together by singing our hymn as the prayer that it is... ("Precious Lord, Take My Hand")