

Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

I Samuel 15:34—16:13; Psalm 20; Mark 4:26-34; II Corinthians 5:6-17.

I Samuel 15:34—16:13 begins with a very troubling statement: “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” (15:35). What a commentary on a life of such great potential gone awry!

The Hebrew word that is translated in the NRSV as “sorry” is the word “nacham”. “Sorry” is a weak translation of “nacham”. It actually means “reject”, “to be penitent” or “to be filled with profound regret”. It is a most powerful word, expressing the deepest sorrow or grief, similar to what we mean in the English language by speaking of one whose “heart is broken”. God is distressed that Saul has failed so badly.

This statement is not suggesting that God recognized he made a horrible mistake in choosing Saul to be king and is repenting. God knew exactly what God was about! Rather, it is expressing the profound distress God feels over our actions and intents, when we go awry.

It was not God’s intent that Saul be made the first king of Israel. Rather, God was acceding to the wishes of the people of Israel who so desperately wanted a king to enable them to defend themselves against Philistine incursion (see the I Sam. 8:1-20 commentary for the 10th Sunday in Ordinary Time). Samuel warned Israel of what changing the government from an amphictyony to a monarchy would do to Israel, and how it would rob them of both their freedom and the centering of the political life of the nation in God. But when Samuel brought the matter to God, Yahweh said to him, “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them” (8:7). Saul was then chosen by God to be king, not because he was God’s choice to be their monarch but because the drama initiated by Israel had to be played out.

In the chapter that begins our Old Testament lesson for this day, the writer states twice that God regretted or was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel. But God also says to Samuel, “Moreover, the Glory of Israel will not recant or change his mind (nacham); for he is not a mortal, that he should change his mind (nacham)”¹ (15:29).

What the author is saying here is not that God made a mistake in choosing Saul as king, and is now repenting of that mistake. Rather, it is that God chose Saul as the result of acceding to Israel’s demand to have a king, even though God knew that tragedy would result from that decision. It was as if God were being a parent, allowing his headstrong children to bear the inevitable consequences of their actions, recognizing that this was the only way they would come to an awareness of their refusal to listen to their parent.

But that doesn’t stop God’s heart from breaking over what God knows will be the inevitable consequences of their demand. “The Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel” (15:35). God is profoundly disappointed at the decisions that Saul has made as king, but if there

¹ A better translation is found in the English Standard Version, “The Glory of Israel will not lie or have regret, for he is not a man, that he should have regret”.

is to be any integrity, Saul must be free to make those decisions and thus bring the nation to the brink of extinction by the Philistines (and their own headstrong selfishness).

This tragic commentary on Saul is then immediately followed by the story of Yahweh's command to Samuel to select a new king of Israel. He is sent to the city of Bethlehem to meet with Jesse and his sons. Samuel requests to meet Jesse's sons, and they are paraded before Samuel, beginning with the eldest. Several strike Samuel as being the stuff of kings. But God says 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" (16:7). Finally, the youngest son, David, who is a mere lad, is brought before Samuel and the prophet anoints him as king over Israel. The Spirit of the Lord comes upon David "from that day forward" as the sign that he was indeed chosen and dedicated to someday be king over Israel.

Here is God's true and authentic choice of Israel's king. This was God's intention from the first. If Israel had proven obedient to God, David would have become their first king. So now God selects the man God intended to rule that nation. And rule it, David does, becoming Israel's greatest monarch, uniting twelve tribes into a single nation, breaking the military capacity of Philistia, founding Jerusalem as Israel's "city of God", and extending Israel into an empire that ruled the entire western portion of the Fertile Crescent. Like the judges before him, and unlike Saul, when the Spirit came upon David (16:13), it came upon him for the remainder of his life, so that he was a divinely chosen charismatic leader more in the tradition of the judges than in the tradition of the monarchy established by Saul. He was "God's man". And as God's man, he would shape the destiny of Israel and of Israel's impact upon the world for the next three thousand years!

David was anointed as king over Israel by Samuel before his brothers and father that day at Jesse's home near Bethlehem. But it would be around 15 more years before David actually became the sitting king over both Israel and Judah. Thus, it was true of him and for those who witnessed that anointing that day as it was for Jesus as he shared the parables of the seed growing by itself and the mustard seed, that action now required the virtues of *patience* and *hope* (see the commentary on Mark 4:26-34 below). It required patience of David and those who followed him, because the replacement of Saul by David was going to be neither quick nor easy. And it required hope, because the seed had been planted in that act of anointing, and it would indeed someday bear the fruit that God intended it to yield! So it was for David and his followers as it was for Jesus and his disciples. God had acted. And now patience and hope was required, to see God's action to be worked out. For "the Glory of Israel will not recant or change his mind, for he is not a mortal, that he should change his mind!"

Psalm 20 is a royal psalm, intended to be used in worship that both honors the king and proclaims his dependency upon Yahweh. The psalmist reminds us that Jacob wrestled with God all night, and that determination resulted in both God's blessings being given to the patriarch and God's change of his name to Israel (Gen. 32:22-32). Thus, the king will bear in his person God's promise to Israel as did Jacob so that the power and influence of this king will not be because of

the king's might but because of God's protection and love of him. "May he send you help from the sanctuary and give you support from Zion" (vs. 2).

The psalm then changes focus away from God's blessings to the king and toward expressing confidence in God's continued use of that king for God's (and the nation's) benefit. "May (God) grant your heart's desire", "may we shout for joy over your victory", "may the Lord fulfill all your petitions" (vss. 4 and 5). For God will so bless the king if the king centers his reign and his person in Yahweh.

It is at this point that the psalm reaches its apex. "Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses, but our pride is in the name of the Lord our God. (Our enemies) will collapse and fall, but we shall rise and stand upright" (vss. 7-8). Other nations and other kings seek to build and then to wield their military strength and their diplomatic skill in order to seek their nation's advantage. But the king who is true to Yahweh will trust in Yahweh, not just personally or spiritually, but in the very ways he conducts the business of the nation. His exercise of power and the practice of the nation's politics will be centered on justice, his practice of the nation's economics on equity for the poor rather than building the wealth of the monarchy, and his devotion will be centered in the authentic worship of God. Doing so, the truly Godly monarch will not need to depend upon chariots and horses, but only in God himself. Thus, the entire nation can pray, "Give victory to the king, O Lord; answer us when we call" (vs. 9).

Mark 4:26-34 is essentially made up of two parables that are told by Jesus, with a concluding commentary. The first parable is that of the growing seed (4:26-29). A farmer scatters seeds and tends the land, but the seed "sprouts and grows, he does not know how". The result is a bounteous yield, over which the farmer has little control. But once the yield occurs, the farmer jumps into action, harvesting the bounty.

The second parable is of the mustard seed (4:30-32). In this parable, a mustard seed is compared to the kingdom of God which, though the smallest of all seeds, produces "the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade".

The commentary by Mark is that Jesus taught the people in parables, "but he explained everything in private to his disciples" (vs. 34).

Both parables deal with the "principalities and powers" of Rome and of Israel. But both parables also deal with the Church's mission to the world, irrespective of the actions or reactions of the systems.

The Parable of the Growing Seed suggests that the political, economic and values-creating (religious) systems of humanity will constantly seek the implementation of their agenda to build their power, to accumulate wealth and to control those under their rule. But the followers of Jesus will be in their midst as a farmer, always "turning the soil", sowing the seeds of another kingdom, always agitating the situation. No matter what the systems may do to try to stop the advance of Jesus' shalom community, they cannot succeed. The kingdom of God is like the mystery and the inevitability of the growth of a crop. It simply happens – we know not how!

We may encourage it by our agitation of the systems (turning the soil, watering, pulling weeds). But the growth of the kingdom of God inevitably happens – “first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head”. The coming of God’s kingdom is both inevitable and irrevocable. The only question is whether we will be faithful farmers of it! But the growth is the Lord’s!

The Parable of the Mustard Seed nuances the subject slightly differently. In this parable, Jesus teaches that his small and powerless disciple band will not only survive the opposition of the systems and the world-view they present. The shalom community that they are instrumental in living out and practicing will grow and grow and grow, until it brings into submission all the empires of the world (cf. Ezekiel 31:4-6 and 17:2-4). A particularly intriguing comment in this parable is Jesus’ statement that “the birds of the air will make nests in its (the mustard seed bush) shade” (vs. 32b). In Daniel 4:21, the “birds of the air” is a metaphor that this prophet uses to describe the worldwide dominion of the Babylonian monarch, Nebuchadnezzar. In other words, by using this very familiar metaphor, Jesus is stating that the systems of the world will one day be subsumed under the kingdom of God, will embrace its values of justice, equitable distribution of wealth and a society in relationship with God and each other, and thus, will nest and be shaded in the arms of the shalom community! The “principalities and powers” will not be destroyed, but will be converted!

By telling these two parables, what Jesus is doing is counseling patience and hope. Jesus is counseling *patience*, because the replacement of “the systems of the world” with “God’s kingdom” is neither going to be quick nor easy; it will take millennia. Jesus is also counseling *hope*, because the seed is being sown and it will bear the fruit God intends it to yield.

What strikes me as particularly significant about both these passages is that their common emphasis is that “the battle is the Lord’s”. That is, when we deal in Christ’s name with the systems, working for the justice and equity they are expected to focus upon, God will bring about the victory! It may not be in our lifetime that the victory is won. It may not be in a long sequence of lifetimes (“For a thousand years in your sight is like yesterday” – Ps. 90:4)! But it *will* come! And it will come, not simply because we are faithful, but because this is *God’s* battle – and thus, only secondarily, our battle. We are God’s instruments. But it is God who will bring the victory over the systems, and will establish God’s shalom kingdom here upon earth!

II Corinthians 5:6-17 is a remarkable testimony by Paul the Apostle regarding his own spiritual journey and its power to motivate his mission to the world. Paul points out to the Church in Corinth that he lives between two “worlds”. One is the world “in the body” – that is, the flesh-and-blood world of the here-and-now. But there is a second world toward which he eagerly longs – the world of being “at home with the Lord” (that is, heaven). He lives between those two worlds, looking forward with great anticipation to being “at home with the Lord”, yet living in this world as it actually is. But he lives in today’s world with *patience* and with *hope* – both doing that ministry to which he is called while he is here “in the body”, and yet living in hope for what will someday be when he is fully at one with God. But whether he is in “this body or at home with the Lord”, he lives his life with one passion: “to please God” (vs. 9). That is what his drive for the winning of the world to Christ, the building of the church and the transformation of

society is all about. He wants to please God in all that he does. And that, therefore, is his motivation in dealing confrontationally with the Corinthians.

That is what this second letter to the Church in Corinth is all about – confronting the Corinthian Christians for their divisions, their treatment of one another, and therefore their sully of their Christian witness before the world. The Church in Corinth is a divided church – divided between four parties, giving allegiance to one of four teachers (the Apollos Party, the Pauline Party, the Petrine Party, and then all those who belong to none of the other three parties and therefore have created an opposition party; see I Cor. 1:10-17). Their party spirit has led to great bitterness and acrimony between the members of the church – and the result is a most confusing and distasteful witness to the pagans of Corinth.

Those who provide leadership to these parties and who are pressing their distinct agendas (including those of the Pauline Party) are – by the very fact that they press their agenda at the expense of the unity of the Church – people “who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart” (vs. 12b). That is, although they fill the air with spiritual talk, they are false apostles (11:13) who pride themselves in their outward appearances, seeking to accumulate power, wealth, prestige and control. To the degree that they value such appearances, they are no different than the pagan leaders of the political, economic and religious systems of Corinth – for those pagan leaders, too, seek power, wealth, prestige and control. Corinth’s systems wish to dominate the people, and so do the so-called “Christian” leaders of the Church in Corinth. There is no significant difference between all of them.

On the other hand, Paul sees himself as acting out of the longing to see the Corinthian Christians become possessed by the love of Christ (vs. 14). He longs to please God, and he longs that they should long to please God as their primary motivation, as well!

Sometimes that longing to please God has caused Paul to act in some very arbitrary and apparently shortsighted ways. Thus, Paul says, he may be perceived by the Corinthian Christians as acting foolishly or irrationally in regards to them (vss. 11-15). But such foolishness is motivated by his desire to see them truly committed to Christ and Christ’s body – and thus abandoning their party spirit in their love for each other and for the world.

Paul then ends his plea with these magnificent words. “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view. Even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new” (5:16-17)!

The phrase “from a human point of view” is literally, in the Greek, “according to the flesh”. Paul uses “flesh” as that which opposes God (e.g., Gal. 5:16-21). What he is saying here is that at one time, even he – Paul – lived “according to the flesh”. He knew of Jesus, but he knew of him as an itinerant rabbi who criticized the Jewish political/economic/religious systems of which Paul was a part. Therefore, Paul perceived Jesus as a troublemaker and a potential threat to the systems that would one day make Paul powerful and influential.

But he now “knows him no longer in that way”. Rather, he – Paul – has become “a new creation” in Christ where his “old has passed away” and everything – his priorities, his understanding of reality, his beliefs, even the love of his heart “has become new”!

Thus it must be for all of us who name the name of Jesus, Paul is saying to the competitive Corinthian Christians and their leaders. You, too, must become “a new creation” in Christ, embracing a whole new way of being a Christian and being part of the church than what you keep on being taught by the world – a world whose systems prize dominating power, the accumulation of wealth and the building of prestige. You are to become “a new creation” that is centered, like Paul, on loving and serving Christ and the Christ in each one of us, and thus living your life centered on praising God! If your old priorities “have passed away” and you have fully embraced Christ as both the savior and the center (Lord) of your life together, then, indeed, everything – including the quality of your life together as the church, “will become new”!

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