

“From Sprouting Seed to Shade-giving Shrub”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

June 16, 2024 - Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

[1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Mark 4:26-34](#)

Please pray with me... “O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen” (William Sloan Coffin).

In last Sunday’s first scripture lesson, we learned about how the Israelites’ incessant longing to be led by a human king, as their neighboring nations were, and so the prophet Samuel anointed Saul to lead them as their first king. Saul certainly looked the part, being tall, dark, and handsome, and he was a successful warrior, but due to his unfaithfulness in following God’s commands, grieved God, and so God, even while Saul was reigning as king, chose another to take his place.

The prophet Samuel, as we heard in today’s reading from 1 Samuel, chose and anointed this new king of Israel. Samuel was led by God to find a person living in the little town of Bethlehem named Jesse and to choose one of his sons to be the next king. As would have been expected in a patriarchal society such as theirs was, only Jesse’s sons were eligible to be named for the role, and Samuel considered the eldest of Jesse’s sons first for the job. Samuel saw that he certainly looked kingly, being tall, dark, and handsome as Saul was, and so Samuel thought that surely this would be the one that God would want for him to anoint as king. But God told Samuel that he was not the one and that Samuel should not assume, as people do, who would be a good leader based on his physical attributes or birth order. Rather, he would choose, based on God’s standards, who would be Israel’s ruler, based on the unseen qualities of the person’s heart.

One by one, Jesse paraded his sons before Samuel, from the eldest to the youngest, for him to determine who was the right fit for the job. Though all had fantastic résumés and appeared to look the part, none seemed to have the right unseen qualities of the heart for the job. And so Samuel asked Jesse if he had shown him all of his sons. “Well, there is one more,” Jesse replied, “the youngest, but he is just a kid and is out taking care of our sheep.” Samuel demanded for this youngest son of Jesse to be brought in for an interview. Still wearing his

shepherd's work clothes and smelling like the sheep he cared for, David came before Samuel, and though David was the youngest of his brothers -- a pipsqueak whose CV consisted of only one line: Caretaker of the family's sheep -- this was the one who had the right qualifications, for he had the faithful and caring heart that God desired for the people's leader to possess. And so, on the spot, even without a second interview, David was anointed by Samuel and empowered by God's Spirit as Israel's next leader.

Our gospel lesson from Mark tells about one of David's descendants, Jesus, also born in Bethlehem, who was chosen for the job of leading God's people. In particular, today's lesson is of Jesus teaching about what living in the realm of God, being part God's flock of sheep, was like. This realm, or kingdom, was not like human kingdoms or empires, which were considered great by humans based on the "eye test," that is by seeing how big and mighty they were, how the people living in them made those who ruled over them look great by building big, lasting things like palaces and roadways and aqueducts and pyramids. No, the realm of God is a spiritual realm, and those living in it, God's flock, are led by a caring Good Shepherd, who guides people to find still waters and green pastures of goodness and love no matter the political realities they may be experiencing.

Jesus teaches in today's parables that the realm of God is one that grows quickly from being tiny to great, going from being just some small seeds to full, fruitful fields that provide food to feed many and bushy meadows that offer safe, shady spaces where the birds can build their nests and raise their young away from the scorching rays of the sun and hungry mouths of predators.

We learn from our Gospel lesson that, under God's caring reign, life grows, is nourished, and is protected so that even more life can grow and flourish. And we learned from our reading from Samuel that what God really desires in people and their leaders is for them to have care-giving hearts, to be people who are actively concerned, not about appearances, about life growing and flourishing in others.

Friends, as citizens of the realm of God, as sheep of God's flock, led by Christ, we are called to let the little seeds of God's love sprout and grow to abundance in our own hearts, that we may have lots of little seeds to cast for others. We are called to live within the protective shade of our communities of faith, and we are called

to make this house of faith a safe space where others can grow and flourish as people.

Will we choose to give shade here, to be respectfully caring of one another, rather than “throwing shade,” speaking or acting contemptuously or disrespectfully toward one another? Will we see and value what God sees and values in one another, good hearts, and recommit ourselves to lifting up those that seem lowly in heart among us? On this Father’s Day, will we be inspired by those who have nourished life in us to be nourishers of life in the people of this community as is our purpose through the Purpose School, food pantry, and our other vital ministries?

Today and always, let us remember that God takes seemingly small and insignificant things and does great things through them. May God work among us now and grow in us and through us greater love, greater life, and greater peace. Amen.