

“Give or Take”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
July 28, 2024 - Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

[2 Samuel 11:1-15; John 6:1-21](#)

We find ourselves on this bright morning right in the middle of an election year, and that leaders are now active and engaged in showing us who they are and what they stand for. Let's spend some time now considering two different candidates that we might follow and support.

Our first leader up for consideration is David, son of the shepherd Jesse and Israel's second king. Following the ways of his father, he grew up as a shepherd, but was endorsed by God and anointed by the prophet Samuel to become the king of Israel while he was still just a youngster. Always a fearless warrior, he was victorious over the giant Goliath and Philistine armies. Ever a talented musician and poet, almost half of the biblical Psalms are attributed to him, including the 23rd Psalm, depicting God as our shepherd, which was read here yesterday during a memorial service for Richard Olsson's brother John and by all of us in last Sunday's worship service as a litany of thanksgiving. But most importantly, the Bible tells us that he qualified to lead because he was "a man after God's own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14).

In today's first scripture lesson from 2 Samuel, we read a story that should make us all question if he was indeed "a man after God's own heart," for in the story, we find David not doing the work of a loving and caring shepherd of people, but the devious and destructive work of a selfish tyrant. The lesson tells us that one spring, when kings and their armies go out to battle, the old warrior David decided to stay at home instead and to send his generals to go out and fight in his absence. While one of his warriors Uriah was out in the field, David saw his wife Bathsheba, and in a terribly violent act against her and her husband Uriah, had her brought to his palace, where he had sex with her. Already an awful story, it gets worse when Bathsheba reveals to David sometime after this encounter that she was pregnant. After bringing Uriah home from battle and trying to get him to sleep with his wife, hoping that he and others would think that when Bathsheba's child would be born, it would have been Uriah's, David's plan was thwarted when Uriah refused to go to his own home while his fellow warriors and the ark of the

covenant remained out in the field of war. In another despicable, violent abuse of his power, David then had Uriah sent to the front line to be abandoned by his fellow troops and killed by their enemy.

These destructive acts against people were truly despicable, but they were the kinds of things that human kings did, and Israel was warned by the prophet Samuel before he anointed their first king Saul that this would be the result in Israel as well, that their rulers would not always act as their providing and protecting shepherds, but as ravenous wolves who would take from them to satisfy themselves. Such was the case here with David.

Now let us look at the other candidate for our consideration this morning, David's descendent Jesus of Nazareth, a child of Mary, raised by Joseph the craftsman, who as a child loved hanging out and teaching in the local synagogue and in Jerusalem's temple when his family would travel there for festivals. Following in the footsteps of his cousin John, who baptized him along with many others, his second act in life, after hanging up his tool belt, was to travel around and teach and heal people.

Today's second lesson from the gospel of John tells us about Jesus' travels in Galilee and that crowds gathered wherever he went, seeking to hear and be healed by him. We heard in the reading that one great crowd gathered around him with nothing to eat, and so to satisfy their hunger, Jesus took a few loaves of bread and a couple fish that one young person had brought with him and, after giving thanks to God, multiplied the meal so that the whole crowd was fed and 12 baskets of leftovers were gathered up afterwards. In this story, we learn that Jesus was not a taker, but a giver, as he used one kid's lunch, not to fill his own belly or the bellies of his buddies, but to satisfy the hunger of that young person along with multitudes of others.

The second part of our gospel lesson tells us of a related event, when, sometime after Jesus fed the masses, he had to retreat from them for they wanted to make him king (in a land already ruled by a king). Jesus retreated to a mountain by himself as his disciples went out on the Sea of Galilee on a boat. As the disciples were in the middle of the sea at night, a storm rose up, and though the sea was raging from the strong winds, walking to them atop the whitecaps came Jesus. The disciples were, of course, terrified, if not by the storm, certainly by seeing

Jesus calmly treading upon the chaotic, stormy sea. But Jesus came to them to share his calmness, and so he offered them a word of peace, first telling them, “It is I,” or *ego eimi* in John’s Greek, which echoes in Greek the divine name I AM. And after revealing his divine identity, Jesus told his troubled disciples to not be afraid and immediately transported them and their boat through the stormy sea to the safety of the shore.

Jesus, who is greater than the dangerous, stormy seas gave safety and peace to his disciples in their time of trouble, just as Jesus, who is greater than the demon of hunger, gave food for the masses in their time of need. To meet the needs of people, followers and strangers alike, Jesus uses his power to give and not to take.

The contrast between Jesus the giver and his ancestor David the taker is clear. Which of these leaders will we choose to follow today? I hope that we would all elect to take the giving path of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, which is the divine way, rather than the path of the taker David, which is the path too commonly taken by people, especially when we hold some power over others. But let us always use what empowers us, all of the resources with which we have been so richly blessed, to give, to bless, to serve, to lift, to build, to feed, to save. In giving, we will find our own needs being met, with abundant leftovers to boot! So let us never be so greedy as to hoard our loaves and fishes, to stay safely cloistered away on the quiet mountainside when people are in peril by the storms that rage below, or worse, to actively take life or rob people of their dignity to satisfy ourselves. This election year, and always, let us choose to be givers and not takers. Amen.