

“Ambition for Self, Ambition for God”

August 20, 2017

1 Samuel 16:1-13

As we turn to our text this morning, let me take a moment to directly address the unrest in our nation and our world, for that is what the Christian faith is all about: God redeeming and restoring, making new broken places and people. I would like to have addressed it last week, but was on vacation. Permit me a moment today, because in part today is the 398th anniversary of the first slaves arriving in Virginia, August 20.

I must acknowledge this is a bit personal for me. Charlottesville is not all that far from where we lived. I've stood in the very spot in the parking deck where we have seen the images of that young black man being beaten with sticks by evil and vile white supremacists. I have stood in that very place with my family. It is personal; it is scary. I hope it is personal for you, too, because this is about people, people made in the image of God and yet treated without dignity because a racist group feels superior. That is evil and sin, as I said a few weeks ago, frankly stupid. But it isn't merely personal. It is theological. We must not make this about personal opinion, but instead have our hearts formed by God's truth.

Racism, viewing one race or ethnicity as superior, better, more dignified, is sin, and it is completely incompatible with the Christian faith, *twice over*. In the telling of our origins in Genesis, we all descend from Adam, also as the Apostle Paul preaches in Acts from one man come all the nations, all the ethnicities, all the cultures. We are human, and therefore dignified and glorious because of the One in Whose image we are made: God's image. No matter the race or culture. To the Greeks who saw all other cultures as barbarians, Paul says to them, to us, who may look at other cultures or races, “We are all the same. Set aside the superiority.”

But second, racism is incompatible with the Christian faith is because of the story by which we live. In Genesis 11, when the nations were scattered at the Tower of Babel, one people received God's covenant love, a committed love, not because they were superior, but rather rooted in the heart of God. The myths of the other nations and peoples of the ANE rooted their glory in their ethnic superiority. Ours is a faith that says we are blessed not because of something inherently superior in us, but rather in the covenant, committed love of our Creator God. In other words, as a theologian colleague of mine has said, “Racism is essentially pagan!”

We are a people by faith in this story, united by this truth that we are saved, honored, glorious not because of one ethnicity or another, but because we have received the affection of the Lord Jesus. We are united in the Lord Jesus as a people of differing cultures. And that is to be honored and celebrated, especially by God's people, who live or should live by the story that my race does not make me special: God's love does. He sets upon every tribe, tongue, people and nation a saving love and binds us together. That is our glory.

Racism of any kind is completely inimical to the Christian faith; it is a pagan notion the Bible tells us. What happened in Charlottesville, in particular the marching of a white group holding torches to intimidate (their own words) is evil and must be condemned without any equivocation whatsoever.

Yet we must go further than mere condemnation. The work of Christ can redeem and restore the hearts mired in white supremacy, too. So we must pray, for repentance and new life in the place of sin and death.

At this time when our culture is heaving, the Church, a multi-ethnic people bound together simply by the loving work of Christ, as Ephesians 2 says tearing down the dividing walls of hostility between ethnic groups, the church has an opportunity to be a living and breathing model of something better, a new people of justice and love, not only proclaiming but living alongside one another in a peace only our Redeemer can bring. We can change the tone TODAY, August 20. Communicating as and Being a people of love...because we have been loved...not because we are superior in any measure. There is much, much more that can and shall be said about racism in our world.

As we've come to the end of our prayer series, and begin to look at 2 Corinthians next week, this morning, I want us to look at our ambitions and ask what they have to do with the Lord and his kingdom. This church is filled with leaders: business and community, family, friends, workplace. If we no longer belong to ourselves, how might that shape how we as an ambitious people *use* our ambitions?

We'll ask the question by looking at the anointing of King David over Israel. Saul had been anointed and had turned out to be a great disappointment. A new king was needed to express a heart like God's heart for his people. How might that look?

⁶ When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed is before him." ⁷ But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." ⁸ Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." ⁹ Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." ¹⁰ And Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. And Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen these." ¹¹ Then Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and get him, for we will not sit down till he comes here." ¹² And he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome. And the LORD said, "Arise, anoint him, for this is he." ¹³ Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers. And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward. And Samuel rose up and went to Ramah.

Ambition is in the news. On vacation last week, our family ran across and had a few humorous discussion about some Fake News, at least for now. The story was that Queen Elizabeth would step aside and name William as King of England, completely bypassing his father, Prince Charles. The story was about the row between William and Charles over unrealized ambitions. Sounds like Days of our Lives, Buckingham Palace edition.

Ambition can be good. It can drive us toward incredible things to achieve, to manufacture, to invent, to produce, to solve problems in the world. Ambition can drive us not to be satisfied with how things are if they are broken. But as we know, ambition can send us off the rails, too. It can press us to manipulate and use; it can value a result of "my design," no matter on whom I might step to arrive.

So where does ambition fit in a Christian life? In the Christian life, it all depends on where it is pointed. Ambition for self, or Ambition for God and his kingdom. Depending which direction our ambitions are pointed in some measure determine how we use what and whom we've been given. How do we see that here?

Ambition for Self

What we see in King Saul is a deep ambition, but it is ambition for himself and his name. To pursue it, Saul was led to use God's people for himself, and he used God to advance self. That can happen to any of us for ambition for self can masquerade as faithfulness, but God blows the lid off of our hiding.

In v. 1, Samuel is asked *how long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel?* Samuel the powerful judge and prophet had anointed Saul to be king as the first king of Israel. Saul was given as Israel cried out for a king like the other nations had. They wanted a man to stand as representative of the Lord as king. So the Lord gave them Saul, who turned out to be exactly like other nations.

That's why Samuel was grieving in 16:1. There had been a vision for a King who serves and leads in order to lift another up. That was the original plan: a king who has a heart like God's, who uses his authority and power the way God uses his authority and power. To **express a heart like God's heart**. One that intentionally uses power and authority to pursue and rescue the weak and wandering sheep of God. One that looks to bless the poor and broken. Protect the weak. Lift up the needy. Lead not to accrue for himself but to distribute and blessing of others. A king who would die for his people, for the honor of the Lord before the people rather than use God and the people to enrich himself.

I wonder if that describes us? Each of us have some leadership place with others, whether in our workplace, in our home, with our kids, as a mentor for another. It can be formal or informal. But the question for us to consider is how we use our power? Are our ambitions put to use to enrich ourselves or lift up another?

One good test for us is to search for the presence of envy in our souls. If we are using our ambitions for self, then we will envy what someone else has that we don't. Envy is feeling pain because we don't have that thing, that status, that respect, that blessing, that another has. Dorothy Sayers has said that envy starts out, "Why should I not enjoy what others enjoy? But it devolves into, "Why should others enjoy what I may not?"

What do you envy in another? Their comforts, money, power, security, health, personality quality, status, respect? Whatever you envy in another is a fairly good indication to what we seek to use our ambitions to achieve for self. We envy in others what we long to take for ourselves, things which feel will give us life.

Another place where we can diagnose within ourselves the presence of ambition for self versus a heart like God's touches on how we think about and are willing to talk about the racial unrest in our nation, especially in the aftermath of what happened last weekend in Charlottesville. Examining King Saul's regime reveals power and authority used to oppress and harm, rather than reflect God's heart of lifting up the broken and weak. He abused his power in favor of selfish ambition, and it broke God's heart, just as presence in our hearts of selfish ambition does today.

The most direct application of this text this morning is not to tell you what to think about Confederate monument protests and counter protests—either in Charlottesville or St Louis. Rather, the primary attention in the very brief minutes I have is I'd like to consider what the Bible tells us about HOW we treat our neighbors, even neighbors different from us ethnically, culturally. How we use our power, our authority, our blessings...consumed for ourselves or stewarded for others.

Let me make it as plain as I can. If our impulse in dealing with these issues is to solidify our rights, to assert self and merely reify my perspective, if I am unwilling to seek to offer compassion and blessing to the broken and wounded, an inability to graciously and with curiosity listen to neighbors around us, *even if they think differently than ours*, then our hearts are more like Saul's heart than we may want to admit. If our neighbors do not feel from us a willingness to seek to protect them, be curious about and understand, if they do not feel from us a willingness to die a bit to self in order to move toward them in love, then we are doing it wrong. This is not about politics. It is about our character and whether it is being formed be more like the Lord's heart, Whose driving impulse is to lift up the needy, protect the wounded and bless the broken. That drives what our neighbors FEEL from us...not just what we say, but how we say it.

Are we dripping with the compassion of Christ, or simply standing our ground to assert our positions? How do your neighbors experience you? In person, on facebook, on twitter?

I realize this is hard and challenges us deeply in this room. And yet growth to have a character conformed to be more like Christ is always painful and challenging. It can be uncomfortable to move toward these challenges where there are no easy solutions. But take a start.

Ambition for the Lord

In contrast to Saul, in David, we recognize ambitions pointed away from self to the Lord. God sees, v. 1. "provided" is an ok translation. But literally, it says, *I have seen me a king among the sons of Jesse*.

It connects to vs 6-7, where the oldest and buffest son of Jesse is presented. Eliab shows up, perhaps the star-quarterback of the North Bethlehem High Bandits. Maybe he is the tallest and most handsome of the village. But he's not the Lord's anointed, v. 7, *for the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart*.

The question is: what captures our imagination? Tall, strapping and bright wins the day in our world. I know that I'm a bit biased, but the world *perceives* strength in height, looks and mass. I mean there is a reason that for all Tom Cruise movies, he is made to appear taller than he truly is, either by lifts in shoes or camera angles. If you aren't a hobbit, it is hard to be a short action hero!

But God says here, don't let camera angles fool you. Don't believe that how we appear on the outside is an accurate barometer of who we are. What matters is heart, character. Being a shepherd with a heart like God's is exhibited in a heart to pursue others, to serve, to be willing to die to self in order to bless another. We see it in David.

David, *verse. 11 the youngest*, in Hebrew, the *haqatan*, a combination of youth, size and throw-away. It is like Jesse says, to the question of "Is this all?" he answers, no, I have this **runt** out in the field. He's the furthest anyone could imagine from being the new king. One commentator suggested that he is like the male version of Cinderella. Maybe worse. He's not the seventh son, the Hebrew number for perfection; he's the 8th! He doesn't even show up on the map. He doesn't matter to anybody!

But where was he? Verse 11 he was tending the sheep. He is a shepherd. David was in the field, looking out for these precious but defenseless creatures. Really dumb creatures. Creatures who will wander into harm. Being a shepherd was dangerous work in those days because the land was filled with lions and other creatures who wanted to devour the sheep. At times, the shepherd would have to stand between the enemy and the sheep, risking his life to protect this weak and defenseless, even dumb animals. A shepherd was one who used his power to lift up the weak and the needy, the vulnerable, the easy to prey upon. A shepherd's ambitions necessarily had to be turned away from self in order protect another.

David may have been the runt, but every day his life was risked in order to protect the weaker and the vulnerable. THAT is what the Lord saw in a SHEPHERD for his people. His ambitions, his powers used for others. Shepherds look to give self away rather than collecting accolades to feel better about self. People whose hearts are being shaped like God's heart look for ways to give self away.

In that way, David is a shadow of the true King Jesus. Who not only risks his life to protect his weak people, but spent his life for it! Jesus left the Throne of heaven to become "the runt" for us, the one whom Isaiah says was not the tall and handsome one, but the One who was beaten and disfigured in his work on the cross for stepping in to take the condemnation we deserve.

Ultimately, David is just a shadow because like us, he needs this same Good Shepherd, Jesus. David did some awful things; he just like Saul used his power for himself, he envied what others had and it poisoned his soul just like it will ours. He needed the true King Jesus to liberate his soul from the prison of sin. We need it, too, in order to be free.

What do you think would happen in our families, our neighborhoods, our city, if we asked the Spirit to make us into a people who live to give ourselves away? What would happen if we repented of using all of our wealth, both financial and relational, for self, and instead looked for ways that we may be poured out to lift up the weak and the vulnerable? Even the oppressed? What would our city look like if all the leadership capital at Central was unleashed into our city through people whose ambition was to give ourselves away to the needy and the weak? Incredible things, I think.

It starts with us. As you look around the sanctuary this morning, who seems new and not sure of what to do and where to go? Move toward them in order to ask if you can help. It can be challenging to choose to shepherd a new person instead of instinctively circling with our buddies. Or who in your life needs a phone call of encouragement? Who is in distress and needs a listening ear and praying heart? Can you put a name there and move toward them?

This also starts with our leaders. If you come back tonight to the Town Hall, you will hear a bit more about this, but this fall, the elders of our church are reorganizing in order to spend more time intentionally pursuing you for the purpose of nurturing spiritual growth. We are organizing the congregation into generally geographic flocks, not for the purpose of replacing your small groups or Sunday school classes or any of that. Rather, in order to reach out and directly care for and connect with every family in the church regularly, the elders have taken this on. As a means of putting into place 1 Peter 5's commands to elders to shepherd, to care for the flock of God.

Now we aren't going to do this perfectly. It may even take some time for us to do this well. But we are going to try because you belong to God and deserve to be cared for.

Ambition. Used not for self, but for God's kingdom good. I'm excited for us better to connect and care for one another. How about you?