



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 3
Proper 6 (B)
June 13, 2021

RCL: 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Psalm 20; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, [11-13],14-17; Mark 4:26-34

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

By the standards of his day, David was a most unlikely choice to be the future king. His family had no status and no wealth. Nor did David's pedigree portend greatness - his great grandmother was Ruth, a foreigner, and his great grandfather was Boaz, a descendant of Tamar, a woman who seduced her father-in-law. What's more, David was the youngest boy, another defiance of convention. Yet – God sees what is not readily apparent to us and brings about grace and renewal from the most unlikely of places and people.

Scholars call this text the “history of David's rise.” The theme of “seeing” is highlighted several times through the use of the Hebrew *ra'a*, “to see” in 16:1, 6, 7, and 12. David's rise is not based on outward appearance alone, but rather on what lies in the secret places of the heart. To see ourselves and others as God saw David requires discernment and trust in God's ability to channel grace through the most surprising vehicles.

- How might God be inviting us to “see” grace in circumstances, people, or events in the last places we would normally look?

Psalm 20

Our psalm for today might have been written for a king offering sacrifice and prayers at the Temple before heading into battle. Themes of victory and divine support are highlighted throughout this poem, which makes masterful use of synonymous and antithetical parallelism, literary devices often used in Hebrew poetry.

While we might hear in these verses “God-is-on-our-side” cheerleading, we could also interpret the psalm as anti-militaristic. After all, “Some put their trust in chariots and some in horses,” but “we will call upon the Name of the Lord our God” (v.7). We are invited to ask, “In whom or what do we place our deepest trust?” Psalm 20 affirms that the *Lord* answers our pleas and grants our requests; we don't place our ultimate faith in weapons or human leaders. Furthermore, Christian interpreters have read this psalm Christologically, seeing in verses six and seven a foreshadowing of the coming of Jesus, and his call to non-violence as the ultimate symbol of trust in the Lord's holy name.

- Where in our collective and personal lives are we being called to deeper trust in the Lord?

2 Cor 5:6-10, 14-17

Paul uses the metaphors of being “at home” and “away from home” to sort out what is important from what is not. While this might seem a confusing way to go about it, Paul’s audience would have understood that he was employing Stoic philosophy to make his point. The Stoics liked to categorize things into what they called the “preferreds” and “not preferreds.” For example, it didn’t matter to them if you were to eat sumptuous meals, but if given a choice, why not? For Paul, given a choice, why not be with the Lord and finished with his body and earthly life (which, as he likes to point out, caused him all kinds of trouble!)? Paul tells the Corinthians that he put his own preference aside because it is God’s will that Paul be with them (he was not above playing the sympathy card!).

Paul also wants to underscore that how we conduct ourselves as we carry out our everyday lives (“in the body”) matters. Paul strongly believes that God will hold us accountable. In the Orthodox Christian liturgy, this theme is echoed in a weekly prayer of petition: “For a good defense before the dread judgment seat of Christ, let us ask of the Lord.” The way we do anything is the way we do everything; it all matters and it all adds up to something.

Finally, let’s take a moment to unpack the most well-known words from this passage, “We walk by faith, not by sight.” This phrase captures Paul’s wisdom about where we should seek our purpose and direction. Externals – image, status, wealth, relative success – are not the ultimate measure of who we are; they are but a temporary illusion. Just think – if we judged Jesus by his “externals”, would anyone take him seriously? Born out of wedlock, paternity questioned, associated with low-class people, no money (and is apparently “kept” by some wealthy women [Luke 8:1-3]), dies a criminal. Yet we know better than to make our judgments about him on these external attributes. Paul’s words are a call to go deeper, both within ourselves and with others.

- Where do you feel this call to move beyond externals and go deeper - either within yourself or with others?

Mark 4:26-34

Parables are powerful teaching tools. They sift wisdom from our everyday experience, wisdom we often overlook. Parables are also *multivalent*, that is, they can be interpreted in a number of ways. Above all, parables invite us to draw our own conclusions. A teacher who uses parables shows respect for her/his audience. John Wesley put it this way: “He spake the word as they were able to hear it – adapting it to the capacity of his hearers; and speaking as plain as he could without offending them. A rule never to be forgotten by those who instruct others.”

Our text relates two parables about seeds. Both play on the smallness of the seed and how so much that is consequential is happening when no one notices (cf. Paul’s and 1 Samuel’s points about internals and

externals). But it is the mustard seed parable that I think would have been most arresting for Jesus' first-century audience. You see, the mustard bush was considered a weed, and a virulent one at that. The rabbis taught that one could not plant mustard in the same garden as other crops. There always had to be a wall between it and anything else. Why? Once mustard took root, it was nearly impossible to control. It would crowd out everything else.

We also note that the mustard bush is *not* the largest of trees and shrubs - "largest" is a bad translation. Rather, it is the "greatest" (from the Greek "*meizon panton*" - "greater than all"). Why? It is a place where "the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." The kingdom of God, it seems, does not mirror the powerful kingdoms of the world, yet it is a place where people will find peace. There's wisdom in this - as we as a church go about our work for the kingdom, we don't need to focus on being the largest or loudest, but a safe refuge where all the "birds" will find peace.

- How do we continue to create a church that is a safe refuge for all?
- How does it strike you to imagine Jesus trying to make his audience laugh?

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