

Third Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 5—Year B
I Samuel 8:4-11, (12-15), 16-20, 11:14-15
Psalm 138
II Corinthians 4:13-5:1
Mark 3:20-35

Who in here likes conflict? Okay, seriously, **some of us love to engage the tension**, love to push the envelope and ride that energy like a wave; **some of us thrive in conflict**. *And some of us don't really groove on conflict, but we do it pretty well.* *And some of us are just flat out conflict-avoiders*—some of us would sooner die than risk a kerfuffle. *And some of us don't like conflict because we fear it will put the relationship at risk*; we fear we just won't be able to navigate it well and that we'll lose the relationship. So, wherever you fall on the conflict-tolerance spectrum, buckle-in because it's *everywhere* in today's scriptures.

We start with **I Samuel**. We're at a critical stage of development for the people of God. **God has brought them up out of slavery in Egypt**. They have honed their capacity for ambiguity and uncertainty and the slow resolution of their future by a **40-year sojourn in the wilderness**. They have **crossed over into the promised land** and started to figure out life together. They've taken steps forward, and they've taken some steps back. They've worked it out with God, and every now again, they've needed some additional wisdom, some additional guidance. Then, **God would raise up a judge from among them** to help them navigate the tough stretches and remind them what it means to live in relationship with God and each other. It wasn't perfect, but it was lifegiving, and it called for *a degree of maturity* on their part to step up and live this dance with God and one another.

And *then*, and *then* **the demon of comparison**, that "*thief of joy*" as Theodore Roosevelt once noted, *then comparison* slipped in and started **looking** around at **other nations**, and **other nations** didn't have **this loose organization with wise judges** helping to navigate this territory of shared-authority, but *they had a king*. "*Oh, what if we had a king?*" the people of God said. "*Oh, we want a king like them.*"

This did not please Samuel, but he was a dutiful prophet, and he took it to **the LORD**—"*They want a king, God.*" And one might wonder if Samuel was feeling a little bit like a *failure*. How could the people want a **king** on his watch? What did *he do wrong* that the people of God thought this was a good idea? God replies, "*Yeah, I know Samuel, listen to all that the people say to you. They're not rejecting you, but this desire to have king, they're rejecting me being their king; they're forsaking me and serving other Gods. Oh, Samuel, I've been doing this dance with my people since I brought them up out of Egypt. So, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.*"

So, **Samuel** told the people all the things that would happen under a **king**. **Their sons would be sent to war** and **employed in the war economy**. **Their daughters would be put to work**. There would be a **massive redistribution of wealth to the king's inner circle**. The **fruits of their labor would flow toward the king and his courtiers**, and not toward those who produced those fruits, nor toward the good of the society. *Six times* we hear the words, "**He will take.**" Samuel doesn't mince words—"*That's what the king will do, he will take from you, and in the end, you will be slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day.*"

Oh, that's the beauty of God. *God grants us all the freedom in the world to make really bad decisions.* We're not puppets on a string, and sometimes, we have to take the detour, right?

“So, people of God, still want a king?”

“Yep, still want a king. We are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.”

The Friday Book Study is reading a book right now that talks about the *toddler brain*—that reactive, demanding place we can all go when our thinking brain goes off-line. I think this sounds like the people of God are in *toddler brain*.

So, **why do the people want a king?** (*pause*) Well, they *want a king over* them; they *want to be like other nations*; they *want to be governed*; they *want someone to go out before them and fight their battles*. It's hard to be *grown-up* people of God!

The hardest place in the world to stand as a *grown-up* is to **realize your own God-infused, God-empowered inner authority, and then, to respect and honor that authority in others**. Trust me, as a *6 on the enneagram*, I have spent a lifetime *ceding my authority away to institutions or belief systems or inspirational leaders*. I have yearned for someone **to go out before me and fight my battles** because **standing in the wisdom God has given me is just plain scary**. *And goodness, what if I'm wrong???*

But that's why **God placed the people of God in community and raised up judges among them**—*not* to lord it over everybody, but **to help in the difficult task of discernment that is absolutely necessary when we are teasing out what is wisdom from God and what is ego-driven agenda**. Living with the **spiritual authority** and **God-given power** we've been given is hard work, sometimes exhausting work, often lonely work. But boy, *we give that authority away at our peril. When we give that authority away, whether to a king or some other force, we enter a new kind of slavery. At its worst, we trade our humanity in for being a cog in some sort of giant wheel completely at the mercy of whoever is turning the crank. And even if we have chosen to hand our authority over to a more benevolent force, it can still become awfully distorted. Only God is God, and anything else we make God, well, losing our soul is not far behind.*

A la, what we see today in Mark's gospel.

Context here. Remember, **Jesus is in hot water** (*a.k.a. conflict*), **Jesus is in hot water for violating the sabbath. His disciples were plucking heads of grain because they were hungry, and then he dared to heal a man whose hand was withered.** This violated the religious rules, and the rule-keepers didn't like it, and **the Pharisees and the Herodians started trying to figure out how to destroy Jesus.**

But the people sensed there was something powerful going on here—*like healing*—so **Jesus is drawing a crowd wherever he goes, and the crowd is coming from Judea and Jerusalem, from Idumea, and beyond the Jordan, from Tyre and Sidon**—that's like *from all four directions*. And nothing *threatens the powers-that-be* like an **alternative** who's challenging the rules by which *said powers-that-be* are asserting and maintaining their power and control.

Enter Jesus family. They think he's gone out of his mind—literally in the Greek “he's been thrown out of position, displaced.” Wow. Truer words were never spoken. **Jesus has been thrown out of position and displaced, but not because he's out of his mind, but because he has chosen to locate himself with the displaced and dispossessed; Jesus has planted himself at the center of those who were broken and wounded and poor and hungry, who were so left out and left behind by the structures of power, who were in such need of healing.**

Jesus' family doesn't know what to with him, and it scares them. It scares them *for him*, and it scares them *for them*. They know what's at stake when you challenge the powers-that-be. *They are terrified of this conflict. No sooner do they try to restrain Jesus, than the scribes arrive from Jerusalem, and they go for the jugular—“He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.”* What's the best way to silence your opponent? Well, just *grab the mantle of God and say your opponent is demonic.* This tactic is tried and true and still trotted out today.

But Jesus dismantles it completely.

“Oh, Satan can't cast out Satan. A kingdom divided against itself can't stand. A house divided against itself can't stand. If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he can't stand, but it's over for him.” And then that rather cryptic, **“But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.”**

Ched Meyers has done a ton of work unpacking this image in **Mark's gospel**, and he makes the case that, in this passage, *Jesus is going after the two institutions of social control in that time—the ties of kinship and clan AND the power of the Temple and those who controlled the levers of religious power.* Meyers says that **Jesus is talking about doing a little bit of criminal breaking-and-entering to set the house free—think turning over the tables in the Temple and driving out those who've made a mockery of God's house by exploiting the needs of the poor and wounded and making people believe that healing is for sale in a tightly controlled economy.**

Then, Jesus turns the tables on the scribes—“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”—for they had said, ‘He has an unclean spirit.’”

We all jump to the place of wondering, *“Oh my gosh, have I ever blasphemed against the Holy Spirit and committed the unforgiveable sin???”* But we have to understand what this **sin** is. Myers quotes Juan Luis Segundo who puts it this way, *“The blasphemy resulting from bad apologetics (from getting theology wrong) will always be pardonable...What is not pardonable is using theology to turn real human liberation into something odious. The real sin against the Holy Spirit is refusing to recognize, with “theological” joy, some concrete liberation that is taking place before one's very eyes.”*

The scribes accuse Jesus of being possessed by the ruler of demons, but they have committed the unpardonable sin—they have refused to recognize the healing that he is mediating with “theological” joy; they have refused to celebrate the liberation taking place before their eyes. They want to maintain their rightness and control and power INSTEAD of falling into the embrace of healing and wholeness. And clinging to that control will always leave us standing on the outside, and as we saw in I Samuel, God lets us make our choices. Oh, God will always

be wooing us, calling us to let go and fall in love, *but God won't force our hand*—no, God chooses to attract us, *not* coerce us.

And when Jesus' mother and brothers and sisters stand on the outside, asking for Jesus. Jesus turns to that crowd sitting around him inside and says, "Who are my mother and my brothers...Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

In 15 short verses, Jesus has dismantled the tight boundaries of the *two biggest systems of societal control in that society*—family and religion—and he has moved the boundaries from here (small and tight) to here (infinite).

Everyone has access. *Everyone* gets to know healing. *Everyone* gets to thrive. *Everyone* matters.

Family is about understanding that God has imprinted divinity onto every human being. God has planted God in every human heart. God has taken up residence in every human dwelling. *No one gets to control that.* And honestly, *no one gets to cede that away to another.* You don't need someone to go before you and fight your battles. That strength you're looking for, it already lives within in you.

And yes, when you tap that, *it's going to look unruly and out-of-control* to a whole lot of people. And yes, as you start to live and move from that place, *they might say that you're Satan incarnate.* And yes, you might lose some relationships, but *there's a whole family waiting to make this pilgrimage with you*—the lost, the broken, the invisible, the hungry, those who yearn for liberation and are ready to risk "theological" joy *when it unfolds before them.*

So, people of God, "Do you want a king?" OR "Do you want to live in God's kingdom where the strong man holds no power and the only thing that keeps us out is our refusal to come in?"

Choose "theological joy" and, *with authority*, claim your God-given place in the dance of liberation that is *unfolding right before your eyes.* Amen.

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