

## SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

### Proper 6

JUNE 14, 2009B

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

Mark 4:26-34

Several months ago, a member of our parish had asked me to do him a favor. He wanted to read the Bible from beginning to end – and had called me to recommend which translation might be best to read. I did as he requested and just recently got an update on his reading. He told me what an eye-opener it was. He was shocked to see how violent much of the Old Testament seems to be. And it is. As we embark upon this long Pentecost season in our liturgical year, our first lesson for the next several months will take us through the first and second books of Samuel, which, in my opinion, are some of the most violent parts of the Bible. It gives us an account of the fall of Saul and the rise of David as the leader God chooses to govern the people of Israel. Fortunately, the folks who pick the scriptural menu for our lectionary try to shield us from the more R-rated parts by leaving out most of the violent scenes. You'll have to open your Bible at home to read all the bloody details of what happened, for instance, to set the scene for today's lesson. The best I can do is point out some spiritual truths at the heart of the story we've heard today.

Both Saul, the king, and Samuel, the prophet, are very unhappy campers. So are the people. Samuel who had anointed Saul as king – was grieving because Saul had fallen out of favor with the Lord. Samuel knew that something needed to be done before things got out of hand. So he seeks the guidance of the Lord and is told to head toward Bethlehem to the home of Jesse because the Lord has chosen one of his sons to be the next king. And the Lord wants Samuel to anoint him. "Wait a minute, Lord!" Samuel says. "You want me to do what? Saul would kill me if he knew what I was doing." "OK, you're right," says the Lord, "so here's the plan. Go and take a heifer with you and tell Jesse and his tribe that you want to offer a sacrifice to me – and, at an appropriate time in the service, ask Jesse, the proud father that he is, if he would kindly round up his sons and have them walk before you, so you can get a good look at each of them." As we heard, that's exactly what happened. Samuel seemed pretty sure that the eldest, Eliab, was the one the Lord has chosen, but something tells him to hold off from anointing him. It's interesting to note that Samuel, as a young boy, is the one who, while serving as an intern at the temple, thought he heard Eli, his mentor, calling him in the night. "Here I am," Samuel said to Eli. "I didn't call you. Go back to sleep." So he

went back to sleep. But then he heard his name called again. And he went to Eli who told him a second time that he didn't call him. Finally, when it happened a third time, Eli understood that it was the Lord who was calling the youth. He advised him that if he heard the call again, he should say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." And that's exactly what happened. I wonder if that youthful experience of learning to listen more intently for the voice of the Lord played some role in moving Samuel to ask the question of Jesse: "Are all your sons here?"

What strikes me about how this story ends is that Jesse, the father of David, would not have even given a second thought to his youngest son had it not been for Samuel's question. Listen again to his response: "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep. His response to Samuel is a "yes, but..." And we know from our own experiences that when we make a statement followed by "but," everything before it isn't that important. And herein lay the spiritual truth of this story for me - a truth we know but need to hear again and again in our lives. And it is that God's choices are not necessarily the ones we might make. God continually surprises us, because what we see and how we see isn't always the way things are. God acts in hidden ways we often can't see. This point is also an important part of the message at the heart of the teaching of Jesus concerning the kingdom of God. It's why Jesus used stories or parables from everyday living, like the parable of the mustard seed. This story invites us to pay attention to the little, seemingly insignificant things in life. For we never know when or how the kingdom of God is in our midst. It may be a word spoken at a certain moment when someone is ready to hear it. It may be a gesture made, a gift offered, a compliment given, a kindness shared, a memory we cherish. How many of us are where we are today because of small but meaningful acts of encouragement we've experienced - and from people who may never have a clue that God perhaps spoke to us through them.

It's twenty-three years ago today since my father died. And of the many cherished memories I have of him, one seemingly insignificant moment, like a mustard seed, has made a significant impact on my life and growth as a person. It began at Uncle Joe's funeral. I was a young adult at the time my father's oldest brother died. I happened to glance down the pew at one point in the service and saw tears streaming down my dad's cheeks. Something happened to me in that moment which, like the mystery of the kingdom of God, takes time to understand. I think what happened was that I had seen a vulnerable part of my father I had always known but had never quite seen the way I had witnessed it that day. Like the seed sprouting and growing in ways we know not how, his vulnerability in that moment not only drew me closer to him, it opened the way for me to see vulnerability as a strength and not a weakness, because

until that day, I had not thought of vulnerability as a quality or strength. And I had good reasons not to. The root word comes from the Latin, *vulnerare*, which means to wound. To be vulnerable is to be open to criticism or attack. Our predominant culture teaches us not to be vulnerable, to protect ourselves, to hold our cards close to our chest. And yet, like the paradox of the mystery of the kingdom Jesus spoke about in parables, those who are vulnerable oftentimes possess a strength of spirit capable of touching hearts without ever knowing how they do it or when they do it, like my dad at Uncle Joe's funeral so, so many years ago.

One of the ways by which our lives bear witness to the good news of the nearness of the kingdom of God is through our vulnerability. Perhaps this is part of what St. Paul meant when he said that in our weakness God's strength is revealed. It's a recurring theme we'll be hearing in the story of Saul and David in our Old Testament readings this summer, of how the power of God is revealed through our human weaknesses – and, I suspect, it's a recurring theme we keep discovering anew through the parables of our daily living in our relationships with one another.

Amen.

*Bob Hudak  
St. Paul's Episcopal Church  
Greenville, NC*