

## Fifth Sunday after Pentecost – Zach DiMiele

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

We've all heard those stories. Those stories that begin with, "I'll never forget where I was when I heard about it," or something like that. For some of us in this congregation, those events which are forever ingrained on our memory might be the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the assassination of President Kennedy, or for those of us younger folk, the traumatic events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. I certainly remember that I was in the seventh grade, in my first period science class with Ms. McKenna. I remember that we were informed as an entire school through the P.A. system that there had been a terrible attack in New York and that we would be allowed to watch the news during our homeroom.

In the coming days and months the country was swept up in patriotism the likes of which I had not seen before. There were American flags galore and "I am an American" commercials on T.V. and a general sort of agreement rarely had in these politically polarized days that we ought to go to war. We are America, and we do not take things lying down. The same could be said of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, that day which still lives in infamy. We do not take these things lying down. We Americans who supported the war in Iraq and the "War on Terror," and those who supported going to war with Japan and Germany were simply living into a larger story, the story of America. Much like when I was a kid and my dad would take me aside and correct me saying, "we are DiMiele's, and we don't act that way. We act this way," the message seemed to be that we are Americans, and Americans act this way. We are not pushovers, we do not take attacks lying down, we persevere and we are, whatever anybody else says, the best at literally everything.

I feel compelled to place in the caveat that I am not bashing America here. I simply think that the American reaction to such tragedies as we have undergone in the last century or so illuminates the world of scripture presented to us this morning.

I'm sure David and all his host never forgot, as long as they lived, where they were when they heard that Saul, their king, had been killed on the battlefield. Saul! Their King, their first king! The golden boy, the anointed of God who had been raised up to rule them by the Lord and blessed by Samuel. We tend to view Saul as a villain, or at least I do. What with him being the first king of a nation that had spurned God as their sole ruler and his persecution of David, the coolest guy in the Old Testament, I don't find myself too upset with his death because it means, along with the death of his son and heir Jonathan, that the throne is David's! And we know that David is the newly anointed King and rightful ruler of Israel by divine right. Surely, we may rightfully be thinking, David will not be too upset about Saul. I mean, Jonathan, sure! They were best buds! But not Saul! But here, instead of breathing a sigh of relief and putting on a show of

reluctantly accepting the throne with a remark about how tragic the death of his predecessor was, David kills the man who killed Saul out of mercy (thought that's not in the reading for today) and we get a heartfelt lament of the death of Saul and his son. David participates in the public grief that was likely felt in the hearts of the Israelites. Much like the grief we all felt on 7 December 1941, or 11 September 2001, the nation of Israel was likely grieving, and David did not spurn the grief, he embraced it fully, he participated in it because, no matter the differences between he and Saul. Israelites acted a certain way, and Israelites did not act glib when their king had been killed. This was the way Israelites were going act. I believe that here, David was locating himself, not within his own small life, blessed as it was; but in the larger framework of the story of the people of God, of a people who had just lost their king and his heir, of a lost and grieving people trying to find their way.

It is fitting, I think, that the Psalm today is from one of the fifteen Songs of Ascent. These were pilgrimage songs; songs sung on the way to, from and within Jerusalem, which is how they got their name; one never goes "down" to Jerusalem, no matter where on the map the pilgrimage begins; the way to Jerusalem is always up. These songs were sung at festivals in which small personal squabbles were set aside for the loyalties that transcended such petty matters. We might not consider David's differences with Saul "petty," but nevertheless, David set aside his differences with Saul because of such transcendent loyalties. His grief is almost palpable: "how the mighty have fallen in the midst of this battle," he sings. I can almost imagine David being the one crying out from the depths in this Psalm.

These are people who have located themselves within a larger narrative, a story which demands of them the capacity to set aside their personal issues because they are to participate in the faithful actions of the people of God.

Let's look at the example of Jairus: here's a man whose daughter is dying. If there was a situation that would make it excusable to be less than courteous certainly this is it! How many T.V. shows and movies do we see in which the hero, the concerned family member, verbally roughs up the doctor for not being attentive enough to their ailing relative? We would certainly not fault Jairus for being a little more forceful with Jesus, especially when He stops in the middle of a crowd to ask who touched his cloak! Only the disciples are reported to have been incredulous at Jesus' response to the woman touching his cloak. Jairus, we are led to believe stood there waiting silently and patiently while his daughter lay dying at home. Here we see that no individual person, not even the concerned family member, is the hero of the story. We are Christians, and that is not how Christians behave. We know this is God's story, and so we wait on God, however inexplicable or drawn-out his timing may seem to us. We are not to be afraid; only to believe.

While appealing to the Corinthians in our New Testament passage, it is obvious that Paul wants them to do something. It is here that we glimpse the heart of the gospel as Paul sees it. Though Christ was rich, for our sake he became poor so that through his poverty, we might become rich. This is the story that has remade Paul, and it is the story that drives Paul. This notion that God

would become less than what he is has a real impact; it incites a radical response in Paul. This is Paul saying to the Corinthians, “We are Christians, and this is how Christians act.” And so I want to suggest that this story, the story of God made poor so that we might be rich, is the story that we ought to locate ourselves in, that this is the story we ought to live into, and that if we do so, we will find that we have been given new eyes to see, and new ears to hear. Within this story, we will look at the world through radically different lenses.

Richard Beck, professor of Psychology at Abilene Christian in Texas, wrote in his blog “Experimental Theology” that the gospel simply doesn’t matter to most middle or upper-class Americans. He writes:

When the gospel doesn’t matter Christians tend to default to the dominant language of the American culture: consumerism. That is, people think about church in relation to their likes and dislikes. They like this and they don’t like that. They prefer this and they don’t prefer that... To be sure there are things I like and dislike about our church. There are things, if I were in charge, that I’d change. But I’ve grown weary of using this filter for church and the spiritual life. I’m tired of thinking about the Kingdom through the prism of my preferences.

To illustrate, Beck contrasts those with whom he attends church and the prisoners he ministers to at a weekly bible study in a local prison. For those prisoners, he does not need to turn on the “interesting” button. For them, the gospel is not entertainment, it is sustenance; it is not a show, it is life; it is not something to get them out of bed on a Sunday morning, it is the very thing that keeps them going. These are people to whom the Gospel matters.

I think probably most of us in this room know that being American and being Christian are two different identities, sometimes opposed. But it's still easy to miss ways in which our American, or really our developed Western world identity, begins to compromise our Christian one. I think this spirit of consumerism, by which we see the world in terms of likes and dislikes, my rights and your rights, is one of those ways. Our 2 Cor. passage offers an alternative and distinctively Christian lens with which to view the world today. Paul’s call to the Corinthians to give gladly out of their abundance expresses his desire that the privileged Corinthians be shaped by the story of a man who gave up all his rights and privileges and status for them. We are not so different from those Corinthians in our abundance.

At this point I could say a few things about giving more money to people who need it or ride home the tithing train, but I think that's a sermon we're all familiar with. I want this to be more radical for us, as radical for us as it was for Paul, and as it remains for people like the prisoners to whom Richard Beck ministers. I don’t just want us to recognize that we live in abundance, but to recognize that Christ's example shows us that our abundances count for nil. When our God became flesh, he could have accepted great status, enjoying massive wealth, the adoration of all, and the glory he deserved as God. Instead he refused all status, all comforts, all of his own preferences because he recognized that most of our human striving and all that we imagine is owed to us is artificial and worthless.

Because we're surrounded by a consumerist culture, this might strike us as counter-intuitive.  
But this really is good news. I have been impoverished and shackled by the realities of this  
world, and I know I am not alone. We fear failure; we fear we will not earn others' respect; in  
these hard economic times, we even fear we will lose our jobs or end up on the streets. But the  
good news of our gospel is that if we lose everything, we stand in solidarity with Christ. The  
streets might be exactly where God finds us. This is our hope and our courage; this is the  
radical Spirit that enabled David to grieve for the man who wronged him. Certainly we too, then,  
can at least learn to live peaceably with our neighbors no matter our differing consumerist  
preferences. And like Jairus, particularly in these times which are so hard for so many, we  
remember we are not the heroes of our stories who must act and strive and push other people  
or else all will be lost, but that we are called to be saints waiting upon God as he works out a  
bigger, better story that joyfully includes us but, thanks be to God, does not depend on us.