

## Leaving the Church – Ben Wayman

II Samuel 11:1-15; Psalm 14; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

St. Paul's Free Methodist Church, The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, July 26, 2009

Today I'd like to talk especially to those of you who have been hurt by the church. Maybe you have been let down, or disappointed or even wronged by the church. If this is your experience, then today's lessons are for you.

For the past several weeks we have been hearing stories about Israel's golden boy. We've heard about David's anointing by Samuel, victory over Goliath, coronation as king and capture of Jerusalem. We've recalled how it was David who brought the ark, what Israelites believed to mark the presence of God, to Jerusalem. And last week we were reminded, as we have been reminded all along, that David is God's favorite; that God chose David and gave him victory wherever he went.

Not only did David become greater and greater because of God, but last week God anointed David with holy oil and made him the "firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth" (Ps 89:27). God loved David so much that he made a covenant with David and promised to establish his line forever, without exception; with no get-out clause. God placed his faithfulness on the line to establish through David a kingdom without end. David, the golden boy of Israel.

This week David's rise to power reaches its ceiling. Today we find that even God's favorite is not perfect. It's really interesting to me that Israel recorded this story of the great King David in the first place. In so doing, Israel refuses to cover for its greatest star and insists that this scandal be remembered. Today's reading in II Samuel presents us with a bold witness of Israel's commitment to truth and not a delusion of perfection – even if it is King David. But even more significant, and this is what I would like to talk about today, Israel was reminded through its experience with David that **God**, not David, is King. This reminder, I'd like to suggest, has something very important to say to anyone who has been hurt by the church.

I recently had a conversation with a pastor in which he confessed to me a deep disappointment in his ministry. This particular pastor has been the senior pastor of a wildly successful and faithful church for the past twenty-five years. During our conversation, this pastor expressed feelings of burnout in ministry which stemmed from his realization that many, if not most, of his congregation came to church on Sunday not to worship God, but to see him. How sad is **that**? he said to me.

But the truth of the matter is that this is how most of us are, most of the time. We can't easily see God, so we go see people. But they're not just any people, we tell ourselves – they're good people. Really good people. And we hope that these people will transport us right to the feet of God. People like David who was musical and manly and victorious and kingly. Or people like

this pastor who is funny and smart and engaging and charismatic. We hope that in going to see these people who seem so perfect and so real that they will somehow give us everything we need; we hope that they will be able to convince us, by being so good and perfect, that God is real. But the problem is, in going to see these people with these expectations we will always be let down.

And that's just the beginning of the problem. The end of the problem is whether we allow these wrongly framed expectations of other people to confirm or invalidate our faith in God. The problem with setting up our expectations this way – expecting perfection of other people in order to believe in God – is that we have rigged the test so that God cannot win. God cannot win this test because no one is perfect or good enough to convince us of God. This morning our Psalmist assures us of this: “The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one.” (Ps 14:2-3). So every time we try to find the perfect leader or Christian to confirm our faith, we run the very real risk of denying God and setting ourselves up for inevitable disappointment.

So if the beginning of the problem is placing our trust in people rather than God and the end of the problem is pitching God after our hopes in people have been dashed, today we find ourselves smack dab in the middle of the problem. Today we find ourselves in the company of a King who has already placed his trust in himself and has not yet given up on God. Now, it's bad enough when regular people have misplaced their trust, but when a king or anyone else in a position of influence or leadership trusts in themselves rather than God, the fallout is always much worse. So today we get to walk with David, the anointed and established king over Israel (II Sam 5:3,12), in the middle of this problem.

In preparing for today's sermon, I considered exploring how it was that David got himself into the fine mess he did. My imagination was immediately drawn to the opening line, “In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle...David remained at Jerusalem” (II Sam 11:1). Apparently, David didn't think he needed to do what other kings did. By making an exception for himself, David overestimated himself and his uniqueness. And so David quickly found himself in the wrong place, at the wrong time, with the wrong woman. I thought about exploring how David's attempted cover-up stamped out every other kingly task that he had. I thought about how David urged Uriah to live out his own sin – to indulge desire, sleep on couches and remain in Jerusalem, while the rest of Israel camps in tents. And I thought about exploring the extent of David's desperate cover-up: the irony of Uriah delivering his own death sentence in a letter which held the sinister plan for his own murder.

But then I realized that a sermon on David's sin and the fine mess he'd gotten himself into was much too familiar to us to be surprising. We know sin and how it contaminates our lives. We've known it since we were children. That's why our first inclination is to be scandalized when guys like King David turn out to be just like the rest of us – we had hoped that he was someone who had conquered sin. And then we learn the truth about him and we're hurt and maybe even mad.

I wonder how the people of Israel felt when they came to learn of David's abuse of power, his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of many of his own men to cover-up his affair. I wonder if they gave up on God because of him?

I wonder how many of us here today have been deeply disappointed or hurt by the church at some point in our lives. Perhaps you've been disappointed because a particular Christian turned out to be just as selfish as anyone else. Or maybe your confidence was betrayed by a Christian who cared more about interesting gossip than you. Or maybe you've been judged by a Christian who claimed to be acting as an agent of holiness. Or maybe you've been hurt by a pastor, maybe even a pastor in this church, who has fallen short of your expectations or caused you to give up on God.

Experiences like these can be deeply wounding. They are especially wounding when we believe that the trustworthiness of the gospel and even the goodness of God all rides on whether or not God's people are good.

It seems to me that the most common reason people give for leaving the church, be it a specific church or the "church" in general, is because someone "in" the church has let them down in some way.

But today we are reminded that "there is no one who does good, no, not one." While this reminder seems a bit grim, it is actually quite liberating. What this means is that we need no longer expect perfection of other people. The gospel does not depend on the perfection of the church or any Christian. In fact, Christians, of all people, should be the first to admit that we are sinners. Our expectations, then, of other people, even Christians, even pastors, and even ourselves, must be recalibrated.

One of my favorite parts in Morning Prayer is the Confession of Sin. The Confession comes right at the beginning prayer when we as a community, drop to our knees and confess that since we were last with each other, just 24 hours ago, we have sinned. We have sinned against God in our thinking, in our speaking and in our actions. We have wronged God not only in what we have done, but in what we should have done, but didn't do. We have failed to fully love God, we have failed to fully love others, and we have failed to fully love ourselves. What an amazing practice! Every day, we Free Methodists from the holiness tradition confess that we are not holy; at least not in the sense of being morally perfect.

The beginning of the good news for us today is that there actually is someone who is holy, and we see him in today's Gospel reading. It's no accident that these two miracle stories are placed side-by-side. They need to be read together because that's where the good news is.

In the first miracle story, we find Jesus and his disciples on a mountain near the Sea of Galilee. They are pursued by a large crowd who is apparently hungry for something. Jesus presents the disciples with a leading question – "how do we go about providing a meal for all these people?"

Now we are told that Jesus asks this question as a test and based on Philip's answer and Jesus' response, Philip didn't pass. Andrew gets partial credit for showing his work, but he still doesn't see it. Neither Philip nor Andrew imagined that Jesus himself could provide everything they needed.

It's interesting how differently food is used in our lessons today. In our II Samuel reading David, the king over Israel, uses food to intoxicate Uriah; while Jesus, the one whom the people wanted to be king, uses food to nourish strangers. As king over Israel, David presented a challenge to God to remain faithful to his promise. As the rightful King of Creation, Jesus remained faithful to God and fulfilled God's promise.

The identity of Jesus is a critical theme in John's Gospel. In the prologue of his gospel, we are introduced to the Word who was in the beginning with God, who was God, and became flesh and lived among us. Beginning with the opening lines of his Gospel, John builds his drama to the moment in the story when all of the questions swirling about Jesus – where he is from and who he is – come to rest. And it happens in our reading today – in the middle of a storm, in the middle of the sea. You might say, Jesus' reveals his identity to the disciples in the middle of the problem.

It was in this middle of the problem, of forgetting about God and being reminded of him, that the disciples see Jesus – and he's walking on the sea. Understandably, they were terrified. But Jesus' words transport them back to one of the key moments in Israel's history when God revealed himself in a similar way.

It is easy to miss this, though, because our translators of the NRSV get it wrong. Jesus does not say, "It is I" – he says, I AM. Every man in that storm tossed boat knew exactly what Jesus said and what Jesus meant. Jesus said the exact same thing that was said to Moses from the burning bush in the wilderness. I AM is the name of God. Here Jesus reveals himself to be God. Just as God revealed himself to Moses and set his people free, so also Jesus reveals himself to his disciples and rescues them from the storm. Jesus does what God does because Jesus is God.

The good news today is that Jesus is God and David is not. We set ourselves up for certain disappointment and deep pain when we expect anyone other than God to be God. The church, while a partner of God's healing in the world, is not yet "filled with all the fullness of God" as Paul puts it in our epistle reading today. The church is full of sinners who will inevitably let you down. But we are sinners who have been forgiven by the one who has conquered sin.

We don't need a perfect king or a perfect pastor or a perfect church because we have Jesus. It's important for us to see that no one but Jesus is God. And what that means is that Jesus can actually make good on his promises, because that's what God has always done; Jesus can actually provide for our needs, because that's what God has always done; and Jesus can actually set us free, because this is what God has always done.

What makes the church unique, I would like to suggest today, is not that the Christian community is perfect or even more morally admirable than those outside the church. Rather, what makes the church the people of God is our ability to kneel before God, to recognize and confess our sin, and receive God's healing forgiveness. We should not be surprised when we are let down by the church; in fact, we should expect it. But what we should also expect is that the church will be the kind of community who admits wrongdoing, repents and receives God's healing.

David's problem today, and our problem on a daily basis, is not that we are not perfect, but that we forget that only God is. It is just when we begin to think that we have everything figured out, or that that pastor of ours is beyond the grip of sin that we set ourselves up for a great mess and certain disappointment. But the good news is that God is faithful. He will not abandon us to our delusions of perfection or our misplaced hopes. Through Jesus, God reminds us that despite our forgetfulness he will be faithful to accomplish within us, the community of forgiven sinners, abundantly more than all we can ask or imagine. Amen.