

Sermon Text for June 10, 2018

1 Samuel 8:1-22; Matthew 19:16-22

“What Do You Want?”

By Holly Miller

“The Lord is with you.”... You are here because God called us to gather here in this sanctuary. He invited and you came. You are here today to listen to the living Word of God revealed in God’s Scripture and proclaimed to you through the Holy Spirit and to respond to that Word in praise and worship and with obedience in your life. In our Presbyterian Book of Order, it says, “Where the Word is read and proclaimed, Jesus Christ the living Word is present by the power of the Holy Spirit.” That means that we are meeting in the presence of the living Lord.

Let us pray: May we receive the grace of Jesus Christ in your Word today, Lord, and may we respond to Jesus’ call with obedience. Amen.

We’re turning things a little inside out today. You’ve already heard the New Testament Scripture; now we’ll see what God shares with us from the Old Testament in the book of 1 Samuel, Chapter 8, starting at verse 1: *When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. The name of his firstborn son was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beersheba. Yet his sons did not follow in his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice (vv1-3).* Samuel was revered as a judge and a prophet, and not just on a local level; he was the first judge in the Bible to be given status on a national level. Samuel was the leader of all Israel. He was the third judge from the tribe of Levi (Moses and Eli came before him) and it may be that in naming his sons judges he was obeying the Torah, the Jewish Law that entrusted the Levites with the spiritual leadership of the Israelites. Appointing his sons, however, turned out to be a mistake, as their acts of bribery and injustice clearly violated the Torah.

Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, “You are old, and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations (vv4-5).” So this was not one or two people complaining, but *all* the elders of Israel coming to their spiritual leader and offering him a suggestion. They start off well, don’t they? If you want someone to hear your suggestion, I am not so sure this is the way to begin the conversation: truthful perhaps, but unflattering to Samuel and his sons. Your sons do

not follow in your ways, so...we're done with you! And then, there's the actual suggestion: appoint a king for us, something all the other nations have. Considering the mess caused by Samuel's sons, this seems like a viable option, a reasonable request, and one that many of us might suggest. After all, the world was changing, from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age, from a culture of nomadic tribes to city life with centralized power. Why should Israel be left behind? Especially when it seemed likely to be wiped out by the Philistines if something wasn't done, and quickly! Appointing a king sounds like a great idea. Let's see what Samuel thinks about it.

“But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to govern us.” Samuel prayed to the LORD, and the LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me, from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. Now then, listen to their voice; only – you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them” (vv 6-9). So what is Samuel's problem with this request? He may be a little miffed at their treatment of him and his sons. After all, he's been their leader all these years and done a pretty good job interpreting the voice of God for them. But there is likely something more here, something that the Lord establishes has been a continual practice of his people, the Israelites. They often forget that they are his people! And this is just one more episode of rejection, albeit a large one, that will set the Israelites on the path to destruction. What do we mean by “rejection”? How is asking for a king to govern them *rejecting* God?

First, from the beginning Israel was to be different, set apart for service to God. It was not to be like other nations (Deut.17:14), so asking to be “like other nations” was a fundamental rebellion against God's intent. Secondly, Yahweh was to be their king, no other. The Lord's kingship can be traced to Moses (Deut. 33:5) and even acknowledged by non-Israelites (Num 23:21). Balaam, the pagan diviner, when asked to put a curse on this people coming up out of Egypt says, “No misfortune is seen in Jacob, no misery observed in Israel. The LORD their God is with them; the shout of the King is among them.” Now, by asking for an earthly king, the Israelites were rejecting the one who should be their king; they were supplanting his rightful

place. [Read Deut 7:6-9, 5:29; 6:10-12.] So this demand for a king “represents a political manifestation of a spiritual problem.”¹ Interestingly, in 1 Sam 7, the chapter right before the people request their own earthly king like all the other nations, the Lord, in answer to Samuel’s prayer, delivers the Israelites from the Philistines in a mighty way. In response, Samuel sets up a stone, naming it Ebenezer, and saying, “thus far has the LORD helped us.” (That’s the Ebenezer we sing about in the hymn, “Come, Thou Fount.”) This deliverance by God and response by Samuel is written in 1 Samuel right before the elders come to Samuel. O Israel, “Be careful that you do not forget the LORD...” (Deut. 6:12).

Here I want to point out something special. Samuel was upset, displeased with the elders’ demand; what is the first thing he does? Does he say, “Sure, I’ll give you a king?” No. Does he display his anger and yell at the elders? No. *Before* responding to the people, he prays to the Lord. And the Lord tells him to listen to the people, warn them, and let them know what they are asking for. [I have some extra readers helping with this portion of the Scripture, so readers, you are now on standby.] *So Samuel reported all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: 1) he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; 2) and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. 3) He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. 4) He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. 5) He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. 6) He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. 7) He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his 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.”* (vv10-18). So that Israel will be warned and well aware of its choice, Samuel paints the picture of an earthly king, who will assume the rights which belong to God – notice the tenth of their grain, vintage, and flocks, the tithe offering– which will be taken from them. Instead of deliverance, as the people desired and which had been provided by the Lord, this human kingship would bring oppression similar to Israel’s experience in Egypt!

After hearing all of this, the people understood what the Lord desired and changed their minds, right? *But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; they said, “No! but we are determined to have a king over us, so that we may also be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.”* When Samuel had heard all the words of the people, he repeated them in the ears of the LORD. The LORD said to Samuel, *“Listen to their voice and set a king over them.”* (vv19-22a).

The king, chosen by the Lord and anointed by Samuel was Saul, whose name means “asked for.” He was just what the people asked for, just what they wanted, just what they thought would be the answer to all their problems. Instead, their problems were just beginning. As foreshadowed in Deuteronomy 17, “kings would be takers, who would diminish others to further their own interests.”² Israel now had an earthly king, which would lead to a divided kingdom, and then two conquered kingdoms sent into exile. The Lord gave them what they wanted. It’s too bad they didn’t ask, “Lord, what do you want?” as Samuel did.

This brings us to the Gospel scripture read earlier by Dale/Terry. Here, in Matthew 19:16-22, a nameless young man who desires eternal life comes to talk with Jesus. He tells Jesus all the good he has done and asks what more he needs to do. Notice so far it’s all about the young man. He has evidently lived a righteous life. His desires are not bad; he wants to achieve eternal life. Perhaps that’s the key: he wants to achieve rather than receive. He is still in control and is not willing to give that up to Jesus. The young man is listing his merits before Jesus, but he is missing the heart of the matter. After the young man tells Jesus he has kept all of the commandments that Jesus listed, he says, *“What do I still lack?”* Does he recognize that something is missing? Or does he want Jesus to say he is perfect and on his way to eternal life, climbing the stairway to success? “Do not covet” is a commandment Jesus has not mentioned... until now. In verse 21 Jesus replies, *“If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.”* Did you notice Jesus saying that if you give away what you think is important, you will have what truly is treasure, in heaven?

Do you think Jesus is telling each one of us to sell all we have and give the money to the poor? Perhaps. It seems in the case of this rich young man that his riches were standing in his way of reaching heaven. He was unwilling to part with them and they were taking up a whole lot of room in his heart. Even though he religiously kept the commandments, he was missing the heart requirement. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” The rich young man, still nameless, was not *all* in. When the young man heard this word of Jesus to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor, he went away grieving. The NIV says, “he went away sad, because he had great wealth.” And that was all he had – great wealth – but no treasure in heaven. I’m not sure he even heard Jesus’ last words to him: “Then, come, follow me.”

We, too, must ask ourselves, “Are we all in? Is there something that is taking up too much room in our hearts?” As Jesus told the young man, “If you give away what you think is important, you will have what truly is treasure, in heaven. For the Israelites, it was, “*We* want (a king).” For the young man, it was “*I* want (my wealth).” So, the question now is: what do *you* want? Are you saying, “I want...” or are you saying to God, “What do you want, Lord of my life, King of all life, universal Sovereign, Sovereign of my heart?” Do you want to be His? A member of His kingdom? His child? Identify yourself. At the end of the pew you will find name tags that say “Child of God.” Write *your* name on the name tag and place it over your heart. “Hello, I am _____, Child of God.” As His child, as a member of His kingdom, walk out of this sanctuary today, and into this world, bearing the image of God, holding the light of Christ, listening to the Holy Spirit, answering “I am yours, O King,” and asking, “Lord, what do you want?”

¹Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel, Vol 7; The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996) 110-118.

²Ibid