

“An Authentic Heart and Steadfast Spirit”

October 22, 2017

Scripture Lesson: 1 Samuel 16: 1-3

Psalm 51: 10-14

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

I wonder if it ever crossed Samuel’s mind to have a leadership race to determine the new king. He could have still gone with the instruction that the king should be one of Jesse’s offspring. He could have talked to them and see who would run for the job. There were 7 sons so even if 3 of them were interested in could have been an exciting race. Posters, campaign rallies. A ranked ballot might have even avoided the need for second or third ballots - although the drama wouldn’t have been nearly as interesting. Which brother would support whom on subsequent ballots? Would Jesse remain neutral or campaign for his favourite? Would it be assumed that the oldest would win or the most handsome, or the most charismatic ...

I wonder if it ever crossed Samuel’s mind to have candidates apply for the job as king. Who would have the most impressive resume? Who would have the most comprehensive references? What would the criteria for selection be? Who could help with the interviews?

I wonder if it ever crossed Samuel’s mind to make the decision based on popularity. Who was in the news the most? Who had the most product endorsements? Who was highest on the “Most eligible bachelors” list? Who was highest on the richest men in the world list? Who was the most sought after guest on the Bethlehem talk show circuit.

I wonder if it ever crossed Samuel’s mind to ask Jesse if he had any daughters ...

What defines effective leadership? How does leadership, emerge or is chosen?

Today our reading from 1 Samuel tells the story of the selection of a new king. Saul has been king and that hasn’t gone all that well. Prior to the model of kingship there had been a different model of leadership - priest and prophet - of which Samuel had taken over from Eli. Before that there had been judges, before that there had been the Moses and then Joshua model of leadership.

There has been a struggle to find the model of leadership to fit its evolving nation of people who have moved out of slavery, through wilderness and now into sorting out how to establish identity as a nation. Saul has not been a good king - so a new one is needed. Somehow - Samuel has been called out of the Senate of past leaders - to head up the selection committee. This is a delicate matter because Saul is still enthroned, so like so many biblical stories Samuel is given a task and is equipped with a promise - only a promise? Only a promise.

The sons of Jesse come to the sacrificial feast and Samuel's work begins. He is told to not only look at outward appearance and so he is faced with somehow discerning the character and inward makeup of each one. What criteria and process will he use. I wonder if Samuel ever thought of ...

None of the sons emerges as the discerned to be chosen. Samuel goes to Jesse in dismay and says this promise thing hasn't worked out. Is there something I have missed ... or someone. It is then that Jesse remembers the youngest - the boy - out tending the sheep. When Samuel sees him he knows - and as it is said the rest is history - the rest is a whole lot! David goes on to be one of the primary figures in the next chapters of the Israelite history.

We are using a narrative lectionary which takes a broad sweep across the Hebrew history, so this is our glimpse of David for this year. There are lots of stories about David. Some of them are inspirational stories like slaying Goliath. Some of them are violent stories like the slaying of Goliath. There are intriguing stories such as the David's relationship with Jonathon. There is the abusive story of David sexually exploiting Bethsheba. There are the inspirational poetic expressions of faith captured in the psalms (although not all the psalms can be attributed to David). He is a complex, fascinating and faithful character.

Today we have also heard a portion of Psalm 51 - Create in me a clean heart, O God and put a new steadfast (right) heart within me. This psalm is usually associated with David and coming after the sexual exploitation story with Bethsheba. It is felt that these are the words from the confessional booth following that story.

But, what if these words were a mantra of faith that was part of David's life from earlier. What if this was the prayer that Samuel saw written on David's heart. What if this pledge - this prayer - that was part of David's devotions from that day forward - or even from before.

“Create in me a clean heart, O God and put a right spirit within me.”

It is surprising that David was chosen as the king - but when we think about it, the bible is full of surprises when it comes to be chosen for roles and responsibilities in the story of faith.

What does God define as effective leadership, effective faithfulness?

The phrase “a clean heart” may distract us into thinking about clean and dirty and lists of sins, etc. So what if we spoke of an authentic heart. The phrase “right spirit” may distract us into thinking about right vs wrong and what spirits are wrong. So what if we spoke of a steadfast spirit? What if we pondered whether what defines effective leadership, and faithful living as seeking to be authentic? Living with steadfast spirit.

I was thinking about this notion of authenticity the other night when I was driving and in a few moments of thought the core of this sermon emerged in my heart and mind. When I mind shifted

beyond that, I re-focused on what I was listening to on the radio. It was a story about self image in our world and the effect that advertising has had on young women in particular to look attractive.

I remember hearing a study out of Notre Dame about the effect of social media on college students and one of the findings was that on Face book and other platforms there is an emphasis on communicating only that which is good and positive because social media feeds can be traced by employers etc.. So, the result is that many students are not finding outlets to work through the negative realities and hurt of their lives. There was a sense of depression and guilt about needing to look good.

There are many ways that we are groomed to not be authentic. We are taught to be nice, to be superficial - to keep up an image and so we find it hard to be vulnerable, to be honest enough to be able to learn and grow from our mistakes. Our own insecurity leads us to being afraid of difference and to be hard on others. Too often in our society we are taught that our worth comes by lessening the worth of someone else.

It takes growth, it takes honesty, it takes vulnerability, it takes courage to be authentic. And maybe one of the reason that leadership is so difficult in our time is that followers haven't found a way to live out the depth of human experience in healthy ways either. And so we project all our insecurities unto leaders with very little grace or understanding.

And so maybe one of the gifts that the faith story offers to all us - is lessons in how to be human. Being authentic does not mean being perfect. Being authentic does not mean the same blueprint of living for each of us. Being authentic does not mean that we have to compete to be the best.

Create in me an authentic heart and a steadfast spirit. Create in us an authentic heart and a steadfast spirit.

While the prayer that David offered in the psalm is individual, it also expands to a corporate meaning.

Yesterday, about 50 of us gathered here for a conversation about vision and identity as we discern the mission forward for this community of faith. There were many ideas and values expressed. Our authentic identity as a congregation will be different than any other community of faith because we are unique and change and evolve each time a new person becomes engaged in our life.

We are not the oldest congregation, we are not the largest congregation, we are not the smallest, we may not be the most attractive - and we don't have to worry about the most or best; what our mission is to be faithful, to authentic, to be steadfast in love and hope. So, may our mantra - our prayer be - individually, collectively - create in me an authentic heart and a steadfast spirit. Amen.