

A PRE-ELECTION SERMON 1 Samuel 12:1, 13-15

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on November 1, 2020, the Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. The church had begun to invite 25 worshippers to attend per Sunday but otherwise was closed for the Coronavirus pandemic, and the service was livestreamed.

Samuel said to all Israel, "I have listened to you in all that you have said to me, and have set a king over you... See, here is the king whom you have chosen, for whom you have asked; see, the Lord has set a king over you. If you will fear the Lord and serve him and heed his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the Lord your God, it will be well; but if you will not heed the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then the hand of the Lord will be against you and your king."

Months ago I knew that on this Sunday, it would be appropriate to preach a "pre-election sermon." So of all the things going on, I have been spared this week for having to agonize over a sermon title, a small blessing for which I give thanks.

I.

For most of my life as a minister, I have been deeply interested in the way scripture can speak directly or indirectly to ways we mortals shape our common life through politics and government. As a citizen in a democratic nation, and a history major in college, I ponder such centuries-old questions as:

- How do we balance the rights of the *one* against the needs of the *many*?
- How do we balance what an *individual* is responsible for versus what the *larger community* needs to provide?
- How do we structure a government which assures both freedom *of* religion and freedom *from* religious rule?

These are fascinating questions for the seminar room; they are more personal and challenging when times are as fractious as ours have proved to be the last few decades and certainly the past several years.

**

Many of you know that I am tied to the Biblical story of the Fall, with its wise and poignant witness to the pervasiveness of human sin. So deep is my sense of human sinfulness that I am left – sometimes the point of fault – with a *caution* about what we can do in this world that makes an *actual difference* for the common or individual good. I so resonate with W. H. Auden's line – "You shall love your crooked neighbour//With your crooked heart"¹ – that I sometimes wonder what our "crooked" love can accomplish. Yet the steadfastness with which God has remained with us as we seek to exercise our love makes me believe we can accomplish *something*, limited though it may be.

¹ W. H. Auden, "As I Walked Out One Evening," in *Another Time* (New York: Random House, 1940). Available at <https://poets.org/poem/i-walked-out-one-evening>.

Last fall I taught an adult education class at Westminster entitled “The Bible and...” The first session was “The Bible and Government.” Much of what I shared that day comes from an essay in the study Bible I use in teaching my classes and preparing my sermons. The essay is entitled “Biblical *Ambivalence* to Government.”²

The conclusion of this essay makes what I believe is an *accurate* and *realistic* assessment of human government as seen through the eyes of Biblical writers:

- Government provides *protection* and *stability*.
- It demands *support* and *loyalty*.
- Its *gifts* are precious enough to seem *God-given*.
- Its *failures* are sufficiently serious to seem *otherwise*.
- The ultimate danger of government is that it will see itself as *supreme*, *demanding worship* and making *claims* only appropriate for God to make.

This cautionary affirmation matches a quote from Samuel Johnson I shared in my devotion this past Tuesday:

How small of *all* that human hearts endure,
That part which laws or Kings can cause or cure.³

II.

Yet even within the bounds and limits which governments can accomplish, what occurs in governments and the politics that accompany them is highly important for human flourishing (or for human destruction). We see this in our passage for today.

After they have been delivered from slavery, wandered in the wilderness, and entered the Promised Land, the people of Israel approached their aging leader Samuel to request that they be given a king. Their reasons are not all that noble: “so that we...may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.”⁴ God doesn’t think this is a good idea. Samuel doesn’t think it is a good idea. But God says to Samuel: “Go ahead and give the people a king.”⁵ So Samuel anoints Saul as the first King of Israel⁶ and prepares to exit the stage, giving a farewell speech to the people he has led most of his life as the final judge in Israel’s history.⁷

What is remarkable about Samuel’s speech is that though the form of government being established is a *monarchy*, Samuel places responsibility for the *health* of the nation *equally* on the *people* and their *ruler*.

...here is the king...for whom you have asked [Samuel says]...If you will fear the Lord and serve him and heed his voice and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the Lord your God, it will be well; but if you will not heed the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then the hand of the Lord will be against you and your king.

² Carol Grizzard, “Biblical Ambivalence to Government,” *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 407.

³ FOOTNOTE

⁴ I Samuel 8:20.

⁵ I Samuel 8:22.

⁶ I Samuel 9:1-10:8.

⁷ I Samuel 12:1-25.

In a society nearly three-thousand years older than the founding of the democracy in which we are about to elect a leader, Samuel places responsibility on the *people* (as opposed to just the *king*) for the degree to which the nation will flourish and be true to its highest ideals as God's holy nation.⁸ Samuel plants the seeds of responsibility within the hearts and minds of the *people*, not just within the heart and mind of the *ruler*, and within the people as a *whole*, not just within the people as a *collection of individuals* who occupy a common geography and a common name.

...if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the Lord your God, it will be well...

III.

So what does this placing of responsibility on the people – we might say, though it is grammatically incorrect, on “We the People”⁹ – say to us in November 2020, in the United States of America? What does it say to us not so much as we decide for whom to vote (as most of us have already decided and many of us have already voted) but as, starting Tuesday night, we *await, assess, and live in the wake of* the results, *whenever* they become known and finalized?

What I offer today is this: We have an *ideal* in our nation that *all people are created equal*.

We hold these truths to be self-evident,
that *all men are created equal*,
that they are endowed by their Creator
with certain unalienable rights,
that among these are Life, Liberty
and the Pursuit of happiness.¹⁰

The fact that these words were written by free, white men who owned property (including slaves) in a land in which slavery had been a major institution for over 150 years reveals – among other things – the degree to which human words can bear witness to a *reality* far beyond that which their writers *embody* or sometimes even *envision*. It would take the next two hundred years a Civil War, a suffrage movement, a Civil Rights Movement, the spilling of the blood of martyrs, major acts of legislation and court decisions before the nation conceived on the basis of equality began to embody anything near such equality in our laws. To this day, whenever we discuss this *ideal* that all people are created equal, we draw very different conclusions concerning whether we are speaking of *equality of opportunity* or *equality of outcome*.

**

What I feel led to say today is less about equality of opportunity versus equality of outcome than about a *prior* equality that is necessary for both: This is the equality of *being heard*.

Throughout our nation's history, we have experienced an increasing willingness on the part of segments of our population to *speak out* and *speak up*, to request – even demand – from the larger society what Job demanded from God: a *hearing*.¹¹

- A hearing on what it is like to be *excluded* in the ways they have been excluded
- A hearing on what it is like to *suffer* as they have suffered

⁸ Exodus 19:6.

⁹ *The Preamble to the Constitution of the United States of America*, 1787.

¹⁰ *The Declaration of Independence*, 1776.

¹¹ Job 23:1-7.

- A hearing on what it is like to be *deprived* as they have been deprived
- A hearing on what it is like to be *hurt* as they have been hurt
- A hearing on what it is like to be *violated* as they have been violated
- A hearing on what it is like to be *ignored* as they have been ignored.

Whether the demand to be heard – in its most recent forms – has come from the Tea Party Movement, the Occupy Movement, the Black Lives Matter Movement, the Me Too Movement, the LBGTQ Movement, or from the people in parts of America (often rural) many of whom voted for Barack Obama twice and then voted for Donald Trump and may have voted for Bernie Sanders in between – behind the *speaking up* of these myriad of voices is – at its most basic level – a *desire to be heard*. Like Job.

If we have been created *equal*, then we all *deserve* to be heard. There is an *equality of being heard*.

But for there to be an *equality of being heard*, there needs to be an *equality of listening*. But even listening can often involve little more than checking a task off a list. In order for there to be an *equality of listening*, there needs as well to be an *equality of empathy*. If *listening* sometimes involves a *checklist*, *empathy* nearly always involves a *relationship*.

**

Most mornings over the past two weeks, it has become my privilege to speak with Associate Pastor Whitney Fauntleroy, usually around 6:00 a.m., when I am preparing for the day and she is preparing for rehabilitation. Among the things she shares is what it is like to have stood in this pulpit on September 13 and to now be dependent on others for basic human functions.

- She has expressed eloquent gratitude for having a health insurance card required by the Presbyterian Church and provided for by our congregation, a card that gives her access to some of the best health care in the world.
- She is aware of the many years she didn't have that card, and of the people in our country who still lack it.
- She is frustrated and funny in describing her trials trying to communicate with the myriad accents and dialects of the people on whom she is dependent for care and who are committed to her care.
- She is enough of a pastor (we're always on duty) to elicit from them why they came to this country, how they got here, what their life is like here, how they balance their second or third job when they leave their shift caring for her so they can pay the rent on an apartment in which their children fend for themselves on Zoom.

All this reminds her how fortunate and grateful she is for a congregation mobilized to help her find and move to a place to live that will be ready and waiting for her when she is able to move from rehab to the life that will be hers for a period of time the duration of which no one on earth yet knows.

Even as she listens to the stories of those caring for her who can do the functions she prays and strives to re-learn, she says: "There is beauty in the brokenness." *Listening* leads to *empathy*. Even *equality of empathy*.

**

Two of the five people left in this world to whom I am related by blood are my great-nieces, now teenagers, who live outside Knoxville, Tennessee. Their father, who is my nephew, met their mother in an institution in which both were being treated for addiction to opioids. Their father has overcome the addiction. Their mother

has not. The two are divorced, and the girls live with their dad. For months, even years at a time, their mother disappears.

I have only seen my nephew three or four times in his life. About a dozen years ago, at family gathering, when he was fresh out of treatment and on his way to the drug-free life he still lives, my nephew shared his story with Maggie and me. Some of what he told us about what his girls had experienced when they were staying with their mother I will spare you – in a rare act of homiletical restraint on my part. It was atrocious.

Like many of us in this *educated* and *accomplished* congregation, and this educated and accomplished *community*, I am but one generation, one sibling, removed from the devastation of the opioid crisis that has ravaged so many parts of rural and small-town America. These communities are part of our nation, which, like many others, *simply want to be heard*. The equality of *being heard*. The equality of *listening*. The equality of *empathy*.

“We hold these truths to be self-evident: that *all* people are created *equal*.”

**

No matter who wins the election this week, if we in our country are going to have constructive discussions about immigration and healthcare and opioids and Black Lives Matter and climate and criminal justice and trade and taxes and our role in the world, if we are going to *discuss*, better yet *navigate*, the differences between equality of *opportunity* and equality of *outcome*, we need an equality of *listening* that leads to an equality of *empathy*. This is a basic starting point for constructive decisions for the *common good* and, because of the role we play on the world stage, for the *good of the world*.

It took an aging leader named Samuel, 3000 years ago, stepping aside for a newly-crowned King, to place the responsibility for *listening not just on the King, but also on the citizens*. We the People.

Whoever is elected President of the United States this week will play a huge role in whatever *degree* or *lack* of flourishing we have as a nation.

...if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the Lord your God, it will be well...

We the People.

Amen.