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Shepherd Boy to Shepherd King

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2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10

Chapter 5 of 2 Samuel opens with everyone ready, anxious even, to make David king of ALL Israel. Everyone still alive that is. 400 are dead, including David's main enemy Abner, who died a stupid thuggish death as he tried to make peace. And Ishbosheth, the last son of Saul, and puppet king of the northern kingdom. Your translations might have called him Ishbael. And a slew of nameless soldiers who probably weren't sure what they were fighting for.

When the killing is done, leaders in the north see the light, realize upon what side their bread is buttered now, and call it the will of Yahweh that David be their shepherd now. Their shepherd and ruler and king. They made a covenant, a contract of fidelity between sheep and shepherd, and anointed him their king too, reconciling what had been so long divided, and ending a Bible story begun twenty chapters earlier when God sent old Samuel to see a man named Jesse about one of his sons who was on that day also tending sheep.

Shepherd boy to Shepherd king! An era of playful faithfulness seen only in these twenty chapters.¹ A way of speaking to God and about God that David seems to outgrow to leave behind like the Legos in my son's closet. His sheep are people now. People with lives that matter. With kids and jobs and bills. And enemies. People who must be kept safe, that they may thrive as human beings, as families and as communities.

Walter Brueggemann points out the simple difference between good and bad shepherds. Good shepherds exist for the well-being of the sheep. Bad shepherds consider the sheep to exist for the well-being of the shepherd. We could say the same of politicians everywhere and always. David was a good shepherd and politician, mostly – but not always – and Israel rose and fell accordingly.

There's much in this passage to preach. Pastors all over the country are using this day after the 4th of July, in the month after Charleston and the Supreme

¹ "Playful faithfulness" & "shepherd boy to shepherd king" are terms coined by Walter Brueggemann.

Court decision on marriage, to speak of segregation. To emphasize the role of the church in the change and the resistance to change all around us. But given the times in which we live, I want to pull this thread in verses 6, 7, and 8.

⁶The king and his men marched to Jerusalem against the Jebusites, the inhabitants of the land, who said to David, ‘You will not come in here, even the blind and the lame will turn you back’—thinking, ‘David cannot come in here.’ ⁷Nevertheless, David took the stronghold of Zion, which is now the city of David. ⁸David had said on that day, ‘Whoever wishes to strike down the Jebusites, let him get up the water shaft to attack the lame and the blind, those whom David hates.’ Therefore it is said, ‘The blind and the lame shall not come into the house.’

For the sake of context, this city occupied by the Jebusites was the last Canaanite stronghold in all of Israel. It belonged neither to the southern nor northern kingdoms. Holding it, David would be beholden to neither. Also, it was likely left alone for so many centuries because it was simply too hard to attack. Or as the Jebusites themselves said, so easy to defend. So easy that even the blind and the lame could keep David’s army out. That pre-battle swagger of every army everywhere, always. What else can they do? Give way to fear? To the terror of what’s about to happen? Or maybe they really did think no one could take the city. No one had for hundreds of years.

David did. And as part of his swagger speech David told his men to kill the blind and lame first. Once captured, he ordered that no blind and lame be permitted in the city at all. Jews composing this story later claim this is why they were excluded from the Temple. At least that’s what some write and say. I’m not sure I believe it – historically, that is.

Do you know there is no conclusive archaeological evidence that the kingdom of David ever existed? In 1993 someone found a stone with “house of David” written on it that was about the right age. 10th century B.C. Was he the *only* David with a house?

Some palatial storehouses and other building remains from the era but nothing that satisfies both biblical literalists *and* scientists looking at the evidence. So whether this is historically perfect is neither here nor there to me. But I believe it literarily and theologically.

“You and you and you are in. You and you and you, not in,” said the shepherd king David, dividing the flock even as he gathered them together. In time the lame and the blind included the foreign and the female. David didn’t exclude them, he just laid down the system into which they were so easily swept. The

lame, blind, foreign, female, who else? Oh yes. The raped, the wounded, the sick, the insane, the leper, the poorest of poor. Was it all David's fault? No. Was it David's intention? No.

Honestly I think he was just trying to hype his men for battle. Shepherds and kings have so much power. The power to do things and the power to make sure certain things don't get done. They have legitimate, God-given power to be *good* shepherds. Power to be used for the well-being of the sheep. And other power too. Illegitimate power sometimes gained through the bad deeds of others. Deeds of which they had no part but yet still benefit.

Like when Joab murdered Abner and the two soldiers murdered Ishbosheth. You read about that right? David had nothing to do with that bad stuff and yet he benefited enormously from it.

Have you ever planted lemon balm? Or mint? Or Sweet Annie? Put in a little plot here and two years later you've got lemon balm over there, in the daylilies. I finally got rid of all the mint but Carl really wanted some for his iced tea. So I dug a hole big enough for a 10 gallon plastic pot. I planted one little stem of mint in that pot. Supposedly the roots couldn't get out. Dug up that pot 2 years ago and now I've got mint all over again. I'm giving up on the mint, just like I gave up on lamb's ears. I hate lamb's ears.

But we can't give up on sheep who are really people, whom God loves more than God loves all the rest put together. And who are us. Not to love them as God loves them is somehow to fail to know how God really and truly loves us. And to fail there is to fail at being human, it seems to me.

I don't know why prejudice takes root like it does. Why it can spread so easily from one people group to another. We get a president who is half black and think racism is surely wrapped up and done. Even if it were, we've not scratched the surface on so many other forms of systematized, legal prejudice right here and now. How tempting to think it's gone, when in fact it's gone underground like blackberry runners. To pop up over there. And there. And there.

Was it all David's fault that blind and lame people were excluded from Temple worship? No. But also, yes. Because at some point doesn't it fall to the ones with the most power to do the most good? At the very least, doesn't it fall to each and every one of us to use what legitimate power we do have to defend the well-being of those with less? Especially those of us who call ourselves Christian?

Frederick Buechner asked how differently the civil rights movement might have proceeded if President Eisenhower had taken the hands of two little black girls and walked them to school on the day after the Supreme Court ordered segregation unconstitutional. That's political, I know. But not to those little girls. It was their lives. A missed opportunity for the most powerful person in the world to use HIS power to defend their well-being. A missed opportunity for the white church to use its power and voice to echo the one we call THE Good Shepherd, who by the way, was NOT white.

A pastor colleague of mine got hammered on Facebook this week by a friend demanding to know if he would perform a same-sex wedding if his church wouldn't host the ceremony. My friend wouldn't give the answer he wanted, which was "yes" or "no," knowing that he'd be judged "Christian" or not, based on his answer.

The hammer-holder is his friend. The pastor wouldn't answer it as a hypothetical question. "Who is the couple?" he wanted to know. Which, by the way, is my answer too. I decline as many straight weddings as I accept, for all kinds of reasons. His friend was positively hostile. I thought my friend was amazing and gentle and so Christ-like in his refusal to let himself be trapped by someone who doesn't have the best interest of the sheep in mind. Who only wants to be right. Who seems to *need* to be right more than he needs to love others or learn something himself.

Personally I am so, so glad that the gay people that I love and the ones I don't even know, now have the same protections of all other married people in our country. But here in Indiana and lots of other states, those same married people can still be fired from their jobs for being gay. That's inequality, friends. As plain as separate drinking fountains and segregated bus seats. And it's wrong. Whatever we think about homosexuality. Whatever else we believe. THAT is wrong. And when the church does not say it's wrong, our silence says it's right.

We give assent to a system that stratifies some lives as worth more than others. Is it the same as shooting people for being black? No. But it's two stops on the same continuum of systematized prejudice in which some people are safer than others because they are white, or straight, or rich, or whatever group any given community considers most worthy of being kept safe.

People have died, recently, violently, by the prejudices of another. I'd like to think their deaths will make a difference from here. That their deaths might wake us up to the prejudice still so deeply embedded within and among us.

Friends, when we speak of the Good Shepherd, we don't recall 2nd Samuel but rather John 10, in which the good shepherd is the one who not only lives for the well-being of the sheep, but also dies for them. We understand his death to be the equalizer that makes us each and every one the same before him. Each and every one bequeathed the full measure of his grace. Meaning, we've nothing left to hold against each other. Nothing by which to measure each other, except that grace.

But we simply have to find a way to embed that understanding into our thinking. Into our speech and into our behavior. That we become so intolerant of the prejudice, the racism and sexism, all the "isms" that infect our living, that it becomes like a splinter festering in our lives and our life together that we cannot bear. That it must be tweezed out however painful tweezing is, so that *finally* all *will* be well. Within and among us. Today and every day hereafter.