



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 4, Proper 6 – Year B
June 17, 2018

[RCL]: 1 Samuel 15:34 - 16:13; Psalm 20; 2 Corinthians 5:6 - 10, [11 - 13], 14 - 17; Mark 4:26 - 34

1 Samuel 15:34 - 16:13

“Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.”

Grief is something that we all experience throughout the course of life, although it is most typically associated with death and other forms of loss. In this case, Samuel’s grief was twofold; he mourned the loss of Saul as a leader, and he also mourned Saul’s sin that angered God. God, however, encourages Samuel not to be shackled by grief over Saul, whom he clearly no longer endorsed!

While we could meditate for days on what it means for God to regret the decision to raise up Saul, we must not get stuck there; there was more in store for God’s people, and Samuel’s work was not yet finished in helping that future unfold. By the end of this lesson, we know that a new king will emerge - and from an unlikely place. Samuel does what he is commanded to do, and we are introduced to David, the shepherd boy.

- Do you trust in the forgiveness that has been given to you so that you may live into the unfolding of God’s mission in the world?

Psalm 20

*“Now I know that the Lord gives victory to his anointed;
he will answer him out of his holy heaven,
with the victorious strength of his right hand.”*

An interesting word study can occur in the sixth verse of the psalm, as the Hebrew used here for “gives victory,” *יָשָׁבָה*, *yasha*, can also be translated as “saves” or “liberates.” This is also the same root that is found in the names Joshua and Jesus. While “gives victory” focuses on triumph and winning, I find more comfort in reading this line as “the Lord liberates his anointed,” because it emphasizes God’s action and speaks to the very human feeling of being held captive to our own devices and disturbances.

Both translations lead to a happy ending, but *rescue* somehow seems more compelling than *conquest*. After all, God is the victorious one in all instances, and we are the beneficiaries. God is always on the side of the oppressed, and while we as Christians are called to stand up for those in any state of oppression, we must bear in mind that ultimately - even when our efforts succeed in lessening the suffering and mistreatment of others - we are not the victorious party in the process. God liberates, and God is victorious.

- What does liberation mean to you, and how might this psalm subvert the power of oppressors?

2 Corinthians 5:6 - 10, [11 - 13], 14 - 17

“And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.”

The first few verses of today’s lesson might make some folks squirm in their seats. Christianity has at times dabbled in dualism, with varying degrees of success or catastrophe throughout history. If we were to read v. 10 with a lens that heads toward literalism, it could provoke anxiety almost immediately; we will all be judged for things we’ve done with our bodies, whether good or evil.

Take heart, beloved of God! There is wonderful news later on in the lesson, for we do not - and must not - read a verse of Scripture in isolation without contemplating the totality of the Paschal mystery and the realities of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yes, he died for all and rose for all. He didn’t rise from the dead only as a spirit, but with his body. By conquering the boundaries of life and death in a holistic way, uniting divinity with humanity, there is great hope for us do great things with *our* souls and bodies. Judgment then is less about punishment and rewards, and more about taking stock.

- In what way can neglecting the health of the body be understood as sin, in light of this passage?

Mark 4:26 - 34

“With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.”

Parables are truly wonderful teaching tools and can range in length from this very brief one about a mustard seed to much longer ones, like that of the Prodigal Son. The Hebrew word most often used for parable is מְשָלָה, *mashal*, which also means “riddle.” Jesus, of course, was not the first to teach with the use of parables or riddles. In fact, he stands in a long tradition of Jewish teaching. *Mashalim* are found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, with examples in Ezekiel, 2 Samuel, Isaiah, and 1 Kings. The beauty of this style of teaching is that there is not an objective interpretation, nor is there one that is always immediately obvious; the meaning is veiled and takes some digging to uncover. I often wonder if Jesus gave his own, fuller take on all of his *mashalim* at the end of the day while lounging with the disciples.

The mustard seed in this parable is most often related to personal faith, and how a tiny bit of faith can grow into something more significant, even moving mountains. Another view, on a somewhat larger scale, would be to see the mustard seed as the Gospel itself. After all, Jesus and his followers were a tiny band of people, and they occupied a tiny speck of land on a vast planet in an infinite universe. And yet somehow, the Gospel spread against all odds and has survived and produced branches, leaves, and a habitat for the soul.

- Why would Jesus prefer to teach the crowds by way of parable or riddle instead of through direct, unambiguous lessons?

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