

St Mark's Episcopal Church, Fincastle, Va
Third Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 5
June 10, 2018

God's Foolish Faithfulness

Before they had even stepped foot in the land of Canaan, the people of Israel committed to being *different*. Israel in the book of Exodus, chapter 19, committed to God. God brought the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and says to the Hebrew people “if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples...you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” The chapter reports that “the people answered as one,” saying ““Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.”” (vv.5-8). Now, in our lesson from Samuel, Israel wants to be “like other nations,” with a king to govern them, and ride ahead of them in battle.

The elders come together and tell Samuel “we are determined to have a king over us, so that we also may be like other nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.” We aren't told *exactly* why the elders wanted a king, all we know is that in the face of all God's previous faithfulness, in spite of the covenant made with God, they said “no” to God. The elders said “no” to Israel's identity as a priestly kingdom and a holy nation, a people set apart. They wanted to be like other nations. Who they were would no longer be determined by God, but by others.

Samuel is displeased by the people's demand, but God seems unphased: he doesn't try to prove Israel wrong, he doesn't try to “get” even, he doesn't step back and wonder what's wrong with him. “They have rejected me...,” God says, “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.” But, though he is rejected by Israel, God will not reject them. Instead, God tells Samuel to warn the people that if

they reject God and set a king over them, the people will be his slaves. The elders don't listen. They want a king. God brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt in order to set them free and now they are willing to be made slaves again.

Christians, most of the time, look a lot like the elders of Israel. We have been gifted a new identity in Christ, told who we are and whose we are and yet, how often do we look around and say that we want to be like other nations? We are given a share in the freedom of Christ and yet so often find ways to live in slavery and to enslave others. I think this is simply because we don't trust God. We don't trust that God will be there, that God will provide, that God really wants us to be free! We say "no," because we can't believe that God has said "yes." One of the hardest times of my life was during my freshman year, and it was so difficult because I spent a lot of time wrestling with God. I kept God at arm's length through a good portion of my freshman year because I knew what I wanted my life to look like and who I wanted to be. I had my plans, my goals. I knew who I was. God could be a part of my life, but it would be on my terms.

This wasn't *just* due to 18-year old arrogance, it was also due to fear. I was afraid of what giving God *the* say in my life demanded. It meant I couldn't take refuge in my five-year plans, it meant I couldn't be like so many of my friends and peers. It meant giving up control and trusting God. And trust is hard. We're sinful, fallen humans who deal with other sinful, fallen humans. We can only conceive of trust in human ways. We've all experienced people who have broken and betrayed our trust. Who have disappointed us. The caution and doubt we bring to our relationships with others we often bring to our relationship with God. We say we trust God but in the back of our minds we have all sorts of "what ifs": what if God doesn't come through? What if God rejects me? What if God fails? What if I'm too far gone? What if God isn't there? There are

many more “what ifs” that we put to God, what ifs that make trust hard. I’m sure the elders of Israel had plenty of “what ifs” that they worried about. In their case, and often in our cases, the “what ifs” win out. Our fear becomes more determinative for our actions than God’s faithfulness.

But, thanks be to God, our fear never determines God’s actions. Last week I was reading a book Willis gave me and came across a sentence that said “God’s love is typified by foolish perseverance” (*Law and Gospel*, 75). As I’ve been thinking about this passage and this sermon, this sentence has kept coming to mind. If Christians often look like the elders of Israel, we can rejoice that God is always the same. That who God is in Scripture in who God will always be. And the entirety of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation is a testament to the foolish perseverance of God’s loving faithfulness. Despite Israel’s rejection, God perseveres. Despite my rejection, God perseveres, and despite your rejection – whatever it may be – God perseveres. We see no greater testament to God’s perseverance despite our sin and rejection than Christ. Christ persevered to the point of death for you, me, and the world. That’s foolish perseverance! And it’s good news. There’s no length God isn’t willing to go to for you and me and there’s no rejection so bad that God won’t still be faithful.

After the end of my freshman year I remember very vividly reading Paul’s letter to the Galatians and being moved to tears with the realization that God loved me and that there was nothing I could do about it. Though I thought I had rejected God and kept him at arm’s length, the truth was and is that no matter how hard I try, God will be closer to me than my own breath. Even in the midst of rejection, God was with me. God was faithful to me. God was at work in me. Israel rejects God in favor of a king, but Israel can’t escape God. God will be the one to anoint a king, God will guide the king, God will bless the king. And, in a beautiful biblical twist, it is from the

royal line of Israel that God will become incarnate. Like Israel, we are called to be holy, to be different. But we're gonna fail, we're gonna get it wrong. More often than not we're going to try to be like everyone and everything else other than God, we're going to opt for every king other than God. But the good news is, that no matter how bad we screw it up, no matter how far we think we're from God, he's faithful.

This, I think, helps throw a little bit of light on the Gospel reading today. Jesus speaks of the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit and over the years there have been many answers as to what, exactly, that is. I don't think there's necessarily one right answer, I think many can be offered that are true. What I would say is that the unpardonable sin against the Holy Spirit, the blasphemy which Jesus speaks of, is putting a limit on what the Holy Spirit is able to do. Don't limit God. Don't limit God's reach in the lives of others, and don't limit God's reach in your life. Don't fall for the trap of saying that a person, someone else or yourself, is too far for God. My hope is that the next time you find yourself feeling far from God, or feeling that you've rejected God, or haunted by all sorts of "what ifs" that you'd remember God's faithfulness. God has accepted us in Christ, and that's stronger than any human rejection could ever be. *Amen.*