



“More than Meets the Eye”

1 Samuel 17:32-49

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Third Sunday after Pentecost

The story of David and Goliath is one of the most famous stories in the world. Most people have heard the story or at least know its plot. The story connects with that deep part of us that loves it when the little guy, always the good guy, overcomes great odds and defeats a large and evil enemy. There's something in us that roots for the underdog and loves to see the big guys lose.

My mother was a sports fan, and she always rooted for the underdog. It annoyed me to no end. But I have to admit I have a soft spot in my heart for underdogs.

David's defeat of Goliath and the liberation of Israel from Philistine oppression is much more than an inspirational story to give hope to underdogs. It's part of larger story with deep moral and theological themes which, like all biblical stories, tells us how to live and how to think about God. Or, better put, this story is a story about God which will, if we listen, form our souls.

The story begins about twenty years before David's encounter with Goliath. In those days, there was no king in Israel. Israel was a loose confederation of tribes surrounded by hostile tribes and alliances in perpetual battle over land, power, and domination.

The Philistines were Israel's most dangerous neighbor. Philistia was a nation with imperial designs and the means to defeat all their neighbors. They controlled the production and distribution of iron in the Middle East, giving them advanced weapons they were not hesitant to use in their imperial expansion.

Some brave folks in Israel thought Israel should have a king who would unify the tribes, create a defense force, and keep the Philistines in Philistia. National security hung in the balance. Samuel, the prophet of God in those days, was skeptical, but he listened. The national crisis of the time required drastic action.

One man stood out as royal material. Saul, the son of Kish, cut an impressive figure and seemed to possess rare leadership ability. He was a big man, standing head and shoulders taller than the average Israelite, and was known to be very handsome. His natural attractiveness was accompanied by spiritual power. From time to time, people said, Saul was overcome by the Spirit of God and prophesied. Inspired by God, he seemed to inspire the people.

His resume featured another very attractive feature. When the Ammonites occupied the land of two tribes of Israel and began to torture the citizens, Saul mustered an intertribal militia and drove the Ammonites out of Israel. Perhaps he was the man for the hour?

Samuel gathered the tribal leaders of Israel together. Saul was recommended as a kingly prospect, interviewed well, and by acclamation, was recommended to be the first king of Israel. Samuel concurred and anointed Saul as king.

Saul lived up to his reputation. He unified the tribes and formed a defense force out of the tribal militias. He appointed his son Jonathan as commander, and with skill and guile, he defeated the Philistine invaders in two important battles. After centuries of oppression, even occupation, it seemed like Israel would be a free and independent people.

Alas, it was not to be. The Philistines were too powerful and pressed back against Israel forcing Saul to retreat, concede territory and hunker down in his palace. The early successes faded. Saul's initial courage turned to fear and led Saul to a series of rash and foolish acts. Behind the impressive figure was a very insecure man filled with pettiness and uncontrollable jealousy. The inspired leader of Israel became a craven man who used family members against each other in jealous plots and needless violence. The occasional prophet Saul refused to take advice from Samuel the prophet, and stubbornly turned away from the voice of God.

Saul's behavior under pressure revealed that beneath the impressive exterior there was little substance. He was a hollow man with no moral center or spiritual core to regulate either the power given to him or his own self-interest. Saul had the power of a monarch without an ethic to control himself or his power. It's an old, old, familiar story. Saul's kingdom took on the character of all petty dictatorships. It was rigid, paranoid, clumsy, insular, insecure, impulsive, and finally, illegitimate (I took these words from a *New York Times*'s description of a contemporary dictatorship!).

Samuel the prophet came to regret his part in choosing Saul. Without proper leadership, tribal unity unraveled in the face of Philistine aggression. Saul's family divided against itself and Saul disintegrated into a petty, vindictive, and self-serving parody of himself. The consequences, as always, were visited on others.

In the end, Saul destroyed himself. He engaged in a foolish, unnecessary and suicidal battle against superior Philistine forces. He and his son Jonathan died in battle. Israel's first experience with monarchy ended in failure.

It took nearly twenty years for the sad tale to unfold and, well before the end, Samuel the prophet determined not to make the same mistake again. He set out to find a replacement – this time with a keener ear for God and wiser eyes on his heart.

Samuel's discernment led him to Bethlehem and the house of Jesse. Jesse was the father of eight sons, a sure sign of divine blessing in Israel. Jesse was a leader in the city and likely overwhelmed and honored when Samuel told him he'd come to find the next king.

Like all of us, Jesse was blinded by his culture and his own preconceived notions about how God and the world worked. He assumed his eldest son, a strapping young man named Eliab, was the natural choice to be the king.

Samuel looked Eliab over, listened to his heart, and told Jesse, "He's not the one."

Jesse introduced his second son to Samuel. "No, not him," the prophet said.

Seven times Jesse presented a son and Samuel said, "Not him."

Samuel was sure he was at the right house so he asked Jesse if there was another son. "Well, yes," Jesse answered. "But he's just a boy. He can't be the one. Besides, all he's done so far is take care of the sheep. It's where he is now."

"Bring him here," Samuel said. The boy, David, came before the prophet. Sure enough, he wasn't impressive. He was just a boy, a red head with a ruddy complexion, hardly the image of a Middle Eastern monarch.

“He’s the one,” Samuel said and he anointed the boy David as the next king of Israel. It was the beginning of the greatest era in the history of Israel. Like Samuel told Jesse, “Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart.”

It seems that with Saul, there was less than meets the eye. With David, there was more than met the eye. God could see who David really was and what he’d become. His life demonstrates the point – too often there’s more – and less – than meets the eye.

David had a moral center, a spiritual core, an inner strength that regulated the personal and official power that was given him. David, like Saul, did rash and foolish things but, unlike Saul, the core at the center of David’s life prevailed. He heard the truth, repented, and made things right.

Along the way he governed with wisdom, led with courage, and reformed both state and church with integrity. At the center of David’s life was a moral, spiritual core that governed the power given him. He was guided by a large heart with the amazing capacity to write half of some of the richest spiritual poetry in the world.

The story of Goliath begins with David’s moral outrage and the oppressive occupation of the Philistines and an equal frustration with King Saul’s weakness in the face of massive injustice. David’s battle with Goliath was based on the conviction that God was on the side of the oppressed and against the injustice of all oppression. With courage, accompanied by cunning, David liberated the people of God in the name of God.

We’ve all met a Saul or two in our lives. There are more than enough women and men who seem to be all show and little substance without an inner core to regulate power or personality. Abuse of power is the inevitable consequence. In the end, character is destiny.

The application of the story seems clear. In the larger sense, leadership, an absolute necessity in church and state, is always a matter of character. John Adams famously noted that democracy – and I would add – capitalism – depends on the moral character of the American people. Without character, neither will flourish. A culture and a church that neglects the character of its people and its leaders will finally collapse on itself.

Closer to home, the story of Saul and David is a story about us. Do we have that inner core, a moral center that regulates our inner life and our actions? The answer is critical and a matter of our Christian formation.

When I was a late teen, my father told me something that shocked me then – it makes perfect sense in retrospect. Dad was a conservative Baptist minister whose goal in life was for the whole world to have faith in Christ. That’s why I was surprised when he said, “I didn’t raise you boys to become Christians – that is between you and God. I raised you to be men of character who will be good citizens.”

My next thought after my surprise was, “I don’t remember that lesson.” Dad didn’t talk about character; he lived it. Like all of us he was a flawed person, in some ways deeply flawed. But beneath the surface, it was clear to everyone who knew him that he was man of deep character. He had the courage of his convictions. He was invariably honest. What you saw was what you got. A man of integrity, he never embarrassed his family, his congregation, or his God. He always did the right thing no matter the cost. He loved his enemies, turned the other cheek, knew and loved God with all his being. In the end, people freely trusted him with their lives and their souls. Watching my father formed my soul in ways I am still discovering.

Nothing can be of higher importance to the formation of our families and children than character – ours and theirs. God calls us to be a congregation of people of deep character who reflect an alternative reality and embody a moral center that governs our lives and our community.

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How? The obvious answer is to pay attention to the teaching of Jesus, which always points at the formation of a particular kind of character. The tragedy of our time is how few followers of Jesus know what he taught beyond loving our enemies and turning the other cheek.

But another glance at the story of Saul and David may provide a clue. It appears that Saul's appearance and his talents got him what he wanted most of his life. He was sheltered from the natural consequences of his actions by his natural ability to succeed. He did not learn the meaning of the word, "No." He became an entitled person who expected to get whatever he wanted. And that sense of entitlement subtly eroded whatever moral center he had.

I once had a staff member, an assistant in her department, who aspired to get the job of her boss when he moved on. I told her it was a 50-50 shot at best. We knew her well, and she wasn't ready for the job.

She didn't get the job and when I told her, a mask of resentment and anger twisted her face as she said, "I deserved that job." I don't think she's over her bitterness a decade later.

She was a child of privilege. Her father was a successful attorney and her mother a pioneer in women's ministry and a woman of high achievement. Along the way, their daughter apparently got the idea she deserved all that was given her and deserved whatever she wanted – like this job.

David was given office before he earned it. His character was formed caring for his father's sheep before he dreamed of being king. Unbeknown to his father, the shape of David's life was formed by protecting his sheep from danger. The man who became a warrior wrote world class poetry long before he fought Goliath. His moral center was strong – then he was given power.

David had a humility born of faith and love of God. Apparently he knew all his achievements were a gift and that his person and his office needed regulation.

David failed. Once a sense of entitlement overpowered his moral good sense. When his army was off to war, he saw the wife of one of his generals bathing. He liked what he saw and thought he was entitled to her. After all, he was king. He deserved any woman in the land. Immediately, his sense of entitlement began to erode his moral center.

David's affair with Bathsheba was a disaster for him, his family, and the nation – to say nothing of Bathsheba's life and family. David, confronted with his evil, confessed and was forgiven.

Character begins with the clear understanding that we are a creation of God and our life and everything in our life is a gift and whatever we achieve is also a gift. Disciples of Jesus are men and women who let their moral center be formed by Jesus' life, death and teaching. Their moral center grows with their faith, and their lives and faith are enlivened by God's Spirit.

Character is destiny and character is possible. It's not a matter of chance; it is a series of decisions that never ends.

Amen.

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