

A Sermon on Facing Racism

I Samuel 17

Many of us have been distracted and distraught by the racially-motivated shooting that took place in South Carolina. It is essential that we recognize it for what it is: a domestic act of terrorism through which it has again become evident that people of color cannot feel safe even within the walls of an historic church building. The AME church and the Black Episcopal church were born together in Philadelphia, so these who were shot are part of one family with us in the body of Christ. These are our brothers and sisters killed.

Recent acts of racially-motivated violence in streets and in a church are the major issue that we must face as a nation. And so we turn our attention this morning to the Old Testament lesson of a young man, David, facing the giant, Goliath.

The text tells us that Goliath is the champion of the Philistine army, and the Philistine army was the chief threat and attacker of the people of God in the time of David. Goliath's height is recorded as six cubits and a span which translates to 9½ feet tall. His armor is reported to weigh 126 pounds and his spearhead itself weighs 15 pounds. He was heavily armed.

From the text, we can see that in the minds and memories of the people of God, Goliath has taken on superhuman proportions, such that when he issues a violent challenge to God's people, "they were afraid and greatly dismayed".

Goliath appears larger than life, because he in his person represents the entire Philistine army, which threatens the people of God constantly with violence. Goliath is the personification of a larger, systemically violent threat. And we have had a clear manifestation in South Carolina of the demonic and evil reality of racism in one young man. We have seen a young man personify that racism to such a degree that he has murdered nine people in a church Bible study. And yet in our minds and memories as the people of God, we cannot allow him to take on subhuman or superhuman proportions. He is a human being who has become the representative of the whole Philistine army, the whole racial structure and violence of the nation. Yet and still, he himself is only human.

And once we have been able to accept both the larger racist system that is personified in the one person's act of violence as well as the humanity of the person himself, we as the people of God are ready to move through a process in the text, together with David, from "fear and dismay" into freedom and victory.

This process begins when David claims what he has already experienced in his life as a source of strength when he keeps the sheep. Whenever a lion or bear came through, he would rescue the sheep. "Just as the Lord saved me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear, God will deliver me from the hand of the Philistine."

We need someone in here who has known some hardship, who has been through some stuff, who can witness that God in God's power and grace brought you through so you could sit up and in your right mind in this church this morning, and say with David, "The Lord brought me through this, and brought me through that, and so I know that the Lord will deliver us from the violence of racism today."

Saul tried to help David out by putting a helmet on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail. But the stuff was so heavy that David couldn't move. Likewise, from family and friends, we have inherited interpretations about race and economic class: inherited ways to see the world, ways to understand black and white, ways to understand racial oppression. All of that has been handed down to us for our own survival, so that we can navigate the world safely. But sometimes, all that we have inherited through the generations in preparing to do battle with racism can weigh us down. David says, "I need to let this heavy armor that I have inherited go, so that I am light enough on my feet to face Goliath." Someone in here has stuff they have inherited that we need to have healed and let go of so that we can be light on our feet when facing the realities of racism in the 21st century.

Once he has claimed the strength of his past and let go of what weighs him down, David is ready to face Goliath directly. The text says he draws near to the Philistine. When we witness a violent threat, our instinct is to turn and go the other way. Come on, we want to learn our lesson from this violence and lock the church door, to shut down and protect ourselves. But if we turn a blind eye, if we shut down or shut our doors as individuals or a church, then we cannot be the agents of societal transformation God intends us to be. Our neighborhood is

seeing major change. More people from white and middle-class backgrounds are moving into the area. This could have the negative effect of forced displacement of residents if we turn a blind eye, not willing to face the realities of race and economic class. Or we could become advocates to make sure that people who have been in this neighborhood for generations, including those with fewer economic resources, can stay. We have an opportunity to have a racially and socioeconomically mixed community, but only if willing to face the racist system and possibility of forced displacement head-on. We cannot turn and walk away from Goliath, but rather must face our racial reality.

Then notice in the text that David claims God and not himself in facing Goliath. "You come at me with spear and javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of Hosts." Jack Gaines wrote a book called "My Brother's keeper; not My Brother's Killer". Dr. Gaines is an African-American man in his late 60's/early 70's who grew up in Tidewater, Virginia. In his book, he tells stories of his experience of segregation. In later life, he saw firsthand the genocidal killings of Hutus and Tutsis, in Rwanda. Seeing so much death and oppression he prayed to God, "Why? What is happening here?" God told him when brother kills brother, sister kills sister, when human beings turn their backs on God and one another, they become not only enemies of humanity. They become enemies of God.

When humans are violent and destructive, we are actually being disobedient to God and destroying God's creative order. When human oppresses human, when people set up racist and exploitative national systems they are not simply enemies of their brothers and sisters, but they are setting themselves up as enemies of God. And we all got a bit of disobedience in us, behave self-destructively or violently at times; when we do, we in that moment or act are enemies of God.

Here's the good news if someone sets themselves up as an enemy of God, if a system is designed by humans that is anathema to God. That means the person or system has challenged God to a duel, and no one has arms long enough to box with the God of the universe!

Position your posture in such a way that God can begin to fight your battles for you. What do I mean? Look at Exodus. When Moses tries to go at it alone, take on the whole system of Egyptian oppression by himself, he kills one Egyptian

oppressor and is then forced to flee. But when he has the courage to stand and face Pharaoh under the direction of God's command, "Go and tell Pharaoh to let my people go", it is not Moses who fights Pharaoh. Moses is not strong enough in himself to set the people free. But when God faces off with Pharaoh the oppressive Egyptian society cannot stand. God says enough is enough. Enough violence. Enough threats. Enough oppression.

"I have seen the misery of my people, I have heard their cries on account of slave masters. So I myself have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and bring them out."

And, finally from our story, notice that a well-targeted, well-timed shot under God's direction is all that is required to fell Goliath. Bill Harris sent me a speech this week, the great Howard Thurman quoting the social gospelist Walter Rauschenbusch. "There are many, many good people around, but very few who are good enough to disturb the peace of the devil."

To be ready to take that right shot, you and I have to be prayed up, we have to be imbedded in God's Word, we have to be growing spiritually. There are many, many good people going through the motions of life trying to do their best to do enough to get to Heaven. But there are few willing to do what it takes to disturb the peace of the devil, to end the system of racism that has existed for 400 years. We can still feel afraid of the enormity of the problem, praying fervently but unsure if we have what it takes.

Jesus prayed fervently in the garden-Take this cup from me, yet not my will but Thy will. Because of His faithful obedience though they hung Him high on the cross, that moment of supreme oppression and violence became our liberation and salvation. Christ disarmed the powers and authorities. He made a public spectacle of them on the cross. Because of Jesus no weapon formed against us shall prosper. Therefore, we need not be afraid. Because of the liberating power of God in Christ, we are ready to face the Goliath, the racist system that stands before us. In the power of God, victory is ours!