

Sermon: The Will of God

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

10 June 2018

Based on **1 Samuel 8:4-20, 11:14-15; Mark 3:20-35**

These are two pretty intense readings. There is a lot going on in both of them, with a lot to talk about. These readings also cast light on our world today, however we decide to interpret them.

America's Founding Fathers struggled with the concept of leadership. Who should lead the new nation, if there was to be one? Certainly not a king! That was the point of the whole revolution, to take absolute power away from any one individual. From the time war was declared in 1776, people like John Adams, Ben Franklin, and James Madison, just to mention a few, thought long and hard about how the country ought to be governed, and even experimented with a state-by-state, governing-by-committee system, which failed miserably.

During the Constitutional Convention in 1787, they settled upon an ingenious system of checks and balances, a government of the people, by the people, and so on. According to James Pfiffner, a political scientist at George Mason University in Arlington, Virginia, psychologically, people like to have leaders to look up to. Still, Pfiffner wrote, "At the beginning of the convention when they decided there would be just one person as the executive, there was in Madison's words 'a considerable pause.'"¹

Once they got used to the idea, they wrestled with how such an executive might be chosen. It was a long and ugly debate, but they figured it out and the rest is history.

The United States in the late eighteenth century was unique in all the world from the beginning of time. No other nation or empire had ever been governed in this way, with power being shared between the states and the federal government, and between the executive, the legislature, and the judicial branches. Even the Roman Republic, which evolved from a single monarch to a two-person consul and then to a Senate system, still centered all power in Rome. Democracy is, said Winston Churchill, 'the worst form of government except for all those others that have been tried.'

Good governance has always been an issue, and the Bible describes how people tried out different forms of government while at the same time resisted the one form of government that always works best.

From the death of Joshua, the people were led by judges, sometimes translated as chieftains. The Bible's Book of Judges begins with the elders who survived Joshua. The last judges appear in the First Book of Samuel, and they happen to be Samuel and his sons, as we heard in the first reading.

The Book of Judges covers a period of about four hundred years and some of the stories in this book make for great, blood-curdling, late-night reading. More importantly, Judges covers the history of Israel as the people grew out of their tribal groups and into an established society with a sense of national identity and a common religious heritage.

The narrative in Judges follows a basic format: everything was good, and the people prospered; but from one generation to the next, the people forgot what the Lord had done for their ancestors and then they 'did what was offensive to the Lord.' They forsook the Lord, did bad things, and bad things happened to them. Not until the Israelites cried out to the Lord did the Lord raise up a champion for them, chieftains such as Othniel the Kenizzite; Ehud, a left-handed man; Deborah, a prophetess; and Samson. The champion would go out to battle whoever the enemy was at the time, win the battle, and the land would once again be tranquil. Wait a while and repeat the process.

The last line in Judges reads: 'In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in *their own eyes*' (Judges 21:25). That leads to the First Book of Samuel and the birth of the next judge, Samuel. Fast-forward to today's reading where we learn that Samuel has now grown old.

The judge system doesn't work so well when the judges are creeps who mis-manage the job, as Samuel's sons did; that's a commentary on the dangers of nepotism more than anything else, and Samuel understood the problem yet did nothing about it. So, the elders said, 'Give us a king to govern us,' which made Samuel angry.

The Lord said to Samuel, 'Don't worry about it. It's not you; it's me. Listen to them but also warn them.' That's what Samuel did, but the people were determined to have a king so that they 'may be like other nations.' They wanted a king to govern them and to fight their battles. And that's exactly what they got.

The reading from Mark's Gospel is similarly contentious. Jesus, according to some people in the crowd, is out of his mind; literally, 'standing outside his mind.' The scribes from Jerusalem said he was possessed. This follows last week's reading when Jesus healed the man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. In between, he cast out some demons and called his twelve disciples. Now he's just trying to get some rest.

But this crowd is pressing in all around him, to the point where he and the disciples can't even eat their bread. This doesn't seem to bother Jesus much because he calls the scribes to him and spoke to them in parables, which is Mark's way of saying to the reader, 'Pay attention, people!'

In 1961, a theologian named C.H. Dodd said a parable is, 'at its simplest, a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.'

So, when Jesus starts talking about a kingdom divided against itself and a house divided against itself, he's drawing on common life with what might be a reference to what happened when Herod the Great died. The Romans split up the kingdom among Herod's sons and daughter, and the family fell apart, squabbling over territory and power.

That first parable is fairly straight-forward: You need someone like Jesus to cast out Satan, and Satan's time is done. Then, in verse 27, Jesus says one of the most enigmatic things in the Gospels. He said, 'But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man.'

Is the strong man Satan? Why not just keep calling him Satan? Or is the strong man Jesus? Back in chapter one, John the Baptist proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me.' So maybe the strong man *is* Satan and Jesus is the *stronger* man, come to plunder his house. In any case, Jesus has declared his intentions against Satan and evil: they're going down.

Then, in his own defense against the charge that he has an unclean spirit, Jesus warns people about the one unforgiveable sin, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

The episode closes with a comment on family. Jesus' mother and brothers were standing outside while the crowd of outsiders were sitting around him. Jesus broadens the definition of kinship: anyone who does God's will is his family. Any of us can join in.

The Founding Fathers wanted the country's executive to be a common man, not a noble or a prince. The ancient Israelites wanted to be ruled in the same way as their neighbors because they recognized the dangers in their system and figured, well, having a king couldn't be much worse. God knew they were wrong. God knows that we really only need to follow the commandments, especially that first one.

But, people being people, sometimes we need to be challenged with a parable. Parables are meant to make us think it through. Jesus once said, 'What do *you* read in Scripture?' What do we read here about Satan, kingdoms, the strong man, or family? There are preachers out there who are not reading Mark's Gospel today specifically because of the 'house divided against itself' section; they fear it might be too incendiary in their church setting.

When we read the Gospels in a particular way – as a political reading, for example – our own biases tend to sneak in. We might feel compelled to re-translate the passage or even the whole book in such a way to make it fit our own politics and pre-defined conclusions. Do that, and eventually you end up far off course. But if we read it as the Word of God and imagine that Jesus Christ himself is walking through the sanctuary as we read it, you hear it differently.

After a strenuous day in the Temple facing off against the Pharisees, and with half of Galilee following him around, watching him cast out demons, Jesus made some personnel decisions on a mountain. Then he went home, and the crowd followed. All of this activity, with all the controversy and the need to speak in parables, must have led Jesus to wonder, what are we trying to do here?

So, he redefines 'family' to include those who are united by one thing: to do the will of God. It was true in Samuel's time, it was true for Jesus, and it's true for us. The most visible place where we do God's will is at the Communion Table, where all are welcome, enabling even an outsider to do the will of God.

Such a kingdom is completely unlike the other nations.

Such a house cannot be divided.

Amen.

¹ <https://www.seeker.com/why-do-we-need-a-president-anyway-1770881373.html>, accessed 9 June 2018.