

A Sign of Solidarity
1 Samuel 20:24-31, 35-42
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I am honored to be asked to speak today, and deliver the spoken Word of God to this congregation. To be asked by my friend Pastor John Cleghorn, is extremely humbling and something I do not take lightly. I am equally honored at the timing of this event, as it has fortuitously fallen on the weekend in which we celebrate the life and legacy of one Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – one of the greatest human beings to walk the earth as far as I'm concerned, and true minister of the Gospel. I think perhaps what tends to get overlooked about Dr. King, given his long record of activism, commanding vocal presence, and legendary speeches is his extraordinary theology. He embodied the gospel of Jesus Christ, fought for the causes of racial and social justice, not just because it was the right thing to do, but because of who he understood God to be. It was his personal theology that inspired everything from his message to his methods, and we are indebted to him as a body of believers for his insights.

Continuing in this prophetic tradition of speaking truth to power and telling the nations of the earth what “thus sayeth the Lord” I will be speaking from the mantle of social gospel (or the spiritual principles of the Judeo-Christian tradition applied to the lived human experience of everyday people). But prayerfully, what happens as a result of this message is that we leave here inspired, enlightened and empowered to continue the work of our savior and build upon the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

EXEGESIS

I could have used the entire Chapter as my text, but since this is a sermon and not a bible study, and I respect the fact that people would like to go home and watch the Panthers game, I have chosen select portions to focus on. I will however do my

best to provide a background or context, and then summarize what's happening at the point of our reading.

The people Israel have experienced a change in governing structure. Formerly ruled by judges, the people have requested a monarchy like neighboring nations, where a king would lead the people. Begrudgingly, God complies with this stiff-necked request but warns them of calamity ahead. The Lord instructs his prophet Samuel and the last of the judges to anoint Saul as the King of Israel. Saul is a big impressive looking guy, not incredibly confident or fit for the role, but he nonetheless is the one the Lord has selected. So, Israel now has a king, and the Spirit of the Lord is upon him for a time. He grows in power, is mighty in war, but falls out of favor quickly for his disobedience. Not long after this, Saul is informed after having grown in stature and respect that he is being replaced. He does not yet know who it is, but already he begins to grow restless and distrustful of people. His replacement is a boy, a young David son of Jesse (a shepherd). He is poor, not from a family of any great social standing, handsome but unimposing, and extremely proud. The Spirit of the Lord is upon him. He is also a musician, the talent gets him a gig as the king's harp player. So the beginning of David and Saul's relationship is that of king and servant, superior and subordinate, boss and worker. It does not take long for God to elevate David and he begins to grow in power and popularity. He slays Goliath, a story we've all heard about even as a young boy, and leads Israel to several military victories. But the nature of this relationship between David and Saul is contentious and dysfunctional. Whereas Saul appreciates David's gift and talents he also deeply despises him. David has contributed to the development and prosperity of his kingdom, and is yet still mistreated. David has entertained him, he has fought in his wars, when given a little position power he excels, and yet Saul still plots

on his downfall. Seeking at times to kill him out of jealousy. Saul does not want to share power.

Saul has a son, whose name is Jonathan, and David and Jonathan have a bond. Scripture says they were "*one in spirit*". This is a brotherhood, though they couldn't have come from more different backgrounds. Jonathan, is a son of privilege, his father is the King. He is used to the protections and prestige that come with being in this position. David, on the other hand is not wealthy. He is the son of a shepherd with little to no social standing whatsoever. And yet the two cross this boundary to form a solidarity that will prove to be unbreakable. Jonathan knows however that his father Saul, does not like David, though he has been a devoted servant. He confesses as much to David, that his father wants to kill him. David spends the bulk of his time in dedicated service to the king, while at the same time trying to evade his attempts to take him out.

Where we encounter the text in chapter 20, we see David is finally refusing to even go back to the presence of Saul. He is effectively in hiding, when he encounters Jonathan. This time he is telling Jonathan that his father wants to kill him. Jonathan however takes an entirely different tone, and says "*Never*". He says his father tells him everything and that if something like that were going to happen, he would have known. His confidence comes from the fact that a few chapters prior Saul gave Jonathan his word that he wouldn't harm David, and Jonathan believes him. Instead of bickering they hatch a plan. David is expected to be at a ceremonial dinner and decides not to show for two days. He asks Jonathan to tell Saul that he's gone back to Bethlehem to be with his family. Based on his reaction they create some sort of symbol involving three arrows and coded language to indicate whether or not it is safe for David to return. This is where we find ourselves now. The thing about this text is, this happened

thousands of years ago. And since we know we do not live in that time period, as believers we must be convinced that there is something there can be applied in principle to our modern context.

For me, this situation is all too similar to the social climate in which Dr. King found himself, and truth be told where we find ourselves today. The dynamic between Saul and David can easily be viewed the same as America and her black citizens. A relationship that can best be described as at times dysfunctional. Whereas black folk have been in a service capacity for centuries and contributed mightily the prosperity of the nation, there still this rampant mistreatment, this lingering disdain and even obstruction of genuine progress. Like David, blacks have used their musical gifts to entertain, from playing the fiddle on plantations at the master's pleasure to creating whole genres of music from gospel, blues, ragtime, jazz, rock and roll, r&b, hip hop etc. Though these things have soothed the spirits of the country at times even shifted the culture, it has not relieved them from being viewed with contempt. Like David, black people have fought in wars, every war in fact from Bunker Hill to Baghdad only to be in segregated ranks, have their contributions overlooked, come back and be lynched for wearing their uniforms in public, be denied service at the lunch counter or a Title II loan through the FHA or GI Bill for a home due to redlining and blockbusting. The list goes on. Still we can see just like David and Saul, there is a schizophrenic nature to the relationship between African Americans and their country. But these things are in the past, and we have been persuaded that times have changed and consequently so have attitudes and that things are different now. This is essentially what Jonathan told David in verse 2 when he says, *"Look, your father is trying to kill me"*. Jonathan immediately retorts that this is not so, it could not be. He has already admitted as much before, but has

since been persuaded that things are different now. But Jonathan cannot possibly know this from where he sits. He is the son of the king, he is not the subject of his father's anger. In this society, He and David do not have the same status in the eyes of his father. Be that as it may, this doesn't stop these two very different individuals from unifying in covenant. Jonathan essentially says, *"Hey, I don't think it's as bad as you say it is. That being said, I'm still going to check"*. Jonathan and David represent the sort of solidarity that has always existed between groups. One is oppressed, the other is privileged, both working together in harmony to achieve freedom, justice and equality. So verses 24-31 is when Jonathan puts David's theory to the test and sure enough he finds that his father Saul is trying to kill David. After giving this excuse for why David isn't there, Saul's anger burns against Jonathan and he says (verse 30), *"You son of a perverse and rebellious woman! Don't I know that you have sided with the son of Jesse to your own shame and the shame of the mother who bore you?"* He is essentially telling him, "you bring shame to your kind by siding with this person against your own blood". But Jonathan and David, are family in the truest sense and in verses 35-42 we see this sign of solidarity. The three arrows that Jonathan shoots and the coded-language used to instruct the boy who was ordered to fetch them are a sign to David that this is truly his brother. That they are in this struggle together and that Jonathan, even in his position of privilege is willing to risk his own safety to preserve the life his brother. This is solidarity. And this solidarity has always existed. Whether we look at many abolitionists who risked life and limb by speaking out against the evils of slavery, to Quakers who helped orchestrate the freedom of enslaved people through the underground railroad, to Freedom Summer of '64 where young whites and blacks from the Congress on Racial Equality and the Student Nonviolent Coordination Committee put their lives on the line to register black

voters in the South (Mikey Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney paid the ultimate price for this solidarity). And it can be seen today, as young African Americans across the country today protest the inhumane treatment of black people by many in law enforcement. As incident after incident, video after video emerges of unarmed blacks being gunned down by those sworn to protect them, blacks and whites lock arms declaring the simplest and most unadacious confession, “Black Lives Matter”.

Dr. King, was often the leader of these multi-ethnic coalitions and in his absence the charge is on us to not just commemorate his contribution, but to build upon and continue in this tradition. The work is not done, the battle is not over. The same God that compelled Jonathan to stand in the gap for David, is compelling us to do the same for our oppressed brothers and sisters all over the world. It should be noted that just prior to Dr. King’s demise he was forming a huge movement called the Poor People’s Campaign. This was to be a collective of oppressed groups all over the country demanding that freedom ring and justice prevail. He recognized that the time had come to expand the reaches of the movement and I submit the same to you today. It is no longer just our black brothers and sisters, but our Muslim, Immigrant, Latino, LGBTQ brothers and sisters also need to see sign of our solidarity. As Dr. King is quoted as saying, “the time is always right, to do the right thing”.