

Sermon: Real Man and Good Man, in Balance

Year B, Proper 8

[2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27; Psalm 130; Wisdom of Solomon 1:13-15, 2:23-24; Psalm 30;](#)
[2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43](#)

Offered July 1, 2018 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH
Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

We are headed into this Fourth of July week, when fireworks will fly and bells will ring. We will celebrate our independence from Great Britain all those years ago. We are a nation that values independence, of being self-reliant, of pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We think of independence as being unburdened, free, unshackled from limitations. That's the story we tell ourselves, and in so many ways it's a good one. It keeps us in the game, actively trying to make our lives better.

We know it's not the whole story though, right. Many of were dependent on someone else being ready to go to get here this morning at all. Many of you are getting fruit salad ready for your parents or to take to swimming lessons later this week. If we counted up all the things we were dependent on, from roads to power to cell phones, we'd begin to marvel that we could get out of bed unassisted in the morning.

Today's reading from 2nd Corinthians ends *As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."* (2 Corinthians 8:15). The argument the passage has made is for balance in material things. No one has too much stuff and no one has too little. In another sermon, on another day, I'll follow that argument line and see where it takes us. What struck me on this day, was how it was asking for balance in general, not too much and not too little.

The idea of independence has this image of marching forward into new possibilities. But our past is carried forward with us as well. We did win our War of Independence; that is part of what we carry forward. But there is the Civil War and the Holocaust and the Vietnam War¹ and we carry those forward too. Whatever we pursue with our independence, we are limited in what we can do if we ignore the past we carry with us our of the Antietam, out of Auschwitz and out of Saigon.

In today's reading from 2nd Samuel, David has just received word that Saul, the king of Israel and Saul's son, Jonathan, have been killed in battle. Saul has been trying to kill David, or to get him killed, at the very same time Saul has been relying on David in their battle to clear the land of Israel of the Philistines. You may remember one particularly tall Philistine named Goliath that David fought on Saul's behalf. Jonathan, on the other hand, has loved David from the beginning, so much so that it has driven a wedge between Jonathan and his father.

When David learns of their deaths, he doesn't set aside the history. It's there in the lament that he sings. He adds to the history by making public his grief. By actually requiring other people to learn his words of lament and sing them too. *Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! How the mighty have fallen!* (2 Samuel 1:19). It's a beautiful song of loss and a moment

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 217.

of public grief. We have forgotten how to grieve publicly.² We're so focused on power,³ so committed to maintaining our independence, that we've simply forgotten how to carry our grief publicly. We hide it away, telling ourselves, telling others, to cheer up, to get on with life.

Let's be clear. Saul and Jonathan's deaths, and the deaths of two other of Saul's sons, all in the same battle, means the throne of Israel is effectively empty. There is another son who has some supporters, including the head of Saul's army. And there is David, anointed by the priest Samuel to be the King of Israel when David was just a boy and Saul was still on the throne. But it's not obvious in this moment who is going to be the next king. Or how much violence is going to come into play before that answer is clear. David is in a highly political moment. And yet, for this moment, he grieves, out loud, in front of everyone, vulnerable. *Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! In life and in death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you with crimson, in luxury, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel.* (2 Samuel 1:23-24)

David is striking a balance here between the past and the future, between power and vulnerability. He is a warrior and a poet, a former shepherd boy and a future shepherd king of Israel.⁴ Yet there is another balance of sorts that he is striking here.

We have a phrase "a real man." Whatever images that conjures up for you, it is usually someone rugged, stoic to the point of indifference to others, physically tough, unopposed to violence. We also have a phrase "a good man." Here the images are different. Usually it's someone honorable, willing to pitch in to help others, loyal, reliable. Don't focus on the exact definitions. Instead, notice that there are different kinds of masculinity. That there are different kinds of masculinity in the Bible. Just as we are getting wiser about the different kinds of women who appear in the Bible, we are also learning to be more nuanced about the different kinds of men who appear there too.

David sings that *I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.* (2 Samuel 1:26) There is no way we hear this line today and not wonder if David and Jonathan were more than best friends. We wonder if they were lovers. There is plenty of commentary to say that they were brothers in arms, they were friends, that's all it means. There is plenty of commentary to say that yes, they were lovers too. It does not appear that the question of how to read this line in the lament is a modern one. If it is ambiguous now, it was ambiguous when it was sung, and when the song was written down. It is not ambiguous that David loved Jonathan and that Jonathan loved David. David bring that part of himself to this lament, being willing to show how deeply he is grieving Jonathan. If that makes people wonder about what kind of relationship they had, and all the complexity that entails, so be it. David is mourning Jonathan. David's heart is broken and he is not only letting everyone see that but demanding that they sing of his grief too.

David is a compelling figure in the Bible for many reasons. But one was his ability to adapt himself to the situation, to be who the people of Israel needed him to be while being true to himself. When he went to fight Goliath, he went in because no one else would step up. Saul tried to protect him by encasing David in Saul's high tech armor. But David couldn't move,

² Brueggemann, 214.

³ Brueggemann, 214.

⁴ Brueggemann, 119.

couldn't fight the way he was used to when he protected his sheep from predators. So he went into battle, armed with a sling and a bag of stones. When he learns of Saul's death, there had to be some part of him that was relieved. Finally the wily, powerful man who had been plotting to kill him and using all of Israel's resources to do so was dead. But the people of Israel needed to grieve their king if they were going to claim their land. They need to speak their grief if they are not to be paralyzed by the muteness of loss.⁵ David brings his whole self to the moment and service of God and finds the absolutely right thing to do, for himself, for his community, for his God. Not too much. Not too little. Past, present and future, real and good man, individual and servant king all in balance. At the end of July, we will see David again, an older man, established on the throne, where he fails utterly to balance, deciding to bring only parts of himself to a situation that undermines his authority as king.

But in this moment, when David has just learned of Saul's and Jonathan's deaths, David sings a lament. Publicly and out loud. He requires others to join in with him. All of Israel will be needed to keep fighting the Philistines if they were going to achieve God's call of remaining on the land. And in this moment, they need David to bring his whole self to that effort. More than a mighty warrior, more than a political operator, they need a broken hearted man crying out for his loss. A real man, a good man, and independent and wholly dependent man bringing his whole self to the service of himself, his community and his God.

⁵ Brueggemann, 219.