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July 17, 2022

Disordered Desires
1 Samuel 8 | John 6: 14-20

It's a classic story in the Jewish and Christian traditions. The people do not know what they want. Some of them seem to think they know what they want, but the wisdom of their desires is questionable. Some of them want the right things but for the wrong reasons. Here's what's happening.

The old prophet Samuel is nearing the end of his life, and his people are gathered in a primitive sort of Constitutional Convention to discern how best to govern themselves in the future. They are deep in argument about the merits of the old system of the judges by which Israel had held together its confederation of twelve tribes. But looming threats of invasion by various Canaanite nations and with Philistines menacing them from the east, growing security concerns make the appointment of a strong executive king an increasingly tempting option. This alliance of tribes has been held together through many dark and difficult years. What unites the various people is their belief in the one God of Israel - Yahweh, who has delivered them from captivity in Egypt, through the wilderness, and across the forbidding River Jordan. Although they have survived such tribulations in the past, the people still find themselves surrounded by strangers in a strange land. And although God has been faithful to them through several generations when they were on the move, now that they seek to establish themselves they still feel insecure of their place and anxiously vigilant to keep the ground they have won so far. Don't take it personally, God counsels the aging prophet, Samuel. You've been a good judge for the people. Their betrayal is not directed toward you. It's a lack of faith in me, God says. Still Samuel does his best to warn them. Why trade away God's good creation for your own empire? Why work so hard to secure ourselves when God already provides what we need? What makes you think that you could win by violence more than God has granted in peace? You don't know what you're asking for, Samuel prophesies, in one of the great monologues of biblical storytelling. The king you request will become a tyrant. Your sons he will take for his armies, his chariots, and his cavalry. Your daughters he will take for his apothecaries and kitchens and looms. He will annex your fields and orchards and vineyards; he will seize your flocks and herds. He'll tax your grain. He'll corrupt your priests. He'll enslave your poor. You don't know what you want. You don't know what you're asking for. One day, you'll cry out to God to save you from this mess you've made in this vain confusion.

To me this is a story about an inner conflict that we experience individually and corporately. It is about our desire for more. It is the fallacious assumption that we can do better for ourselves what God has been quietly doing all along. These conflicts of desire are what the Christian tradition teaches is the basis of sin. Do not misunderstand this call to confession. Sin is not bad behavior. It is not associated with any identity or way of being in the world. Sin is the

universal human condition that we do not understand ourselves and that we fall short of the will of God.

Of course you know that the people eventually get the king they have been asking for. Things go well enough for a time. The corruption of David is long and incremental and slow. All the consequences that Samuel had foreseen came to pass. But although God was disappointed in the decision, God's presence remained active in Israel's history. God was still faithful when the people had made the wrong choices. To make this confession is to accept our humanity. To receive this judgment and this grace is to be loved by God.

There is one story about Jesus and the disciples that is repeated in several of the gospels. Jesus has recently preached the sermon on the mount and he's performed one of his most stunning miracles - that mystery of hospitality and abundance in feeding five thousand people with just a few fish and several loaves of bread. In the evening the disciples go out to sea on a small boat, where they are surprised by a great storm. You can imagine the terror and confusion that arose in them. What to do? How to get back to shore? They know what they want, but not how to get it. They just want to live. In the rain and through the fog they spot a mysterious presence walking out across the surface of the water. This only spooks them more. Matthew's version says they all thought it was a ghost. But they recognize the voice of Jesus who says simply, "It's me. Do not be afraid." In John's text Jesus stills the storm and approaches the boat. But in Matthew's Gospel, Peter is so relieved by the promise of salvation that he steps out of the boat and toward the image of Jesus, who catches him and holds him above the water.

This is the irony of our condition: Regardless of what we want, what God wants is coming for us. Though we may be at war with ourselves; at war with each other; or perhaps moving forward in peril or moving backward in despair; or stuck in the sure promise of destruction - there is the presence of Jesus: grace unbidden. It comes and finds us. It was probably there all along. It was doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.

Grant that we may remember this biblical truth and begin to trust:

God is already present.

What God is already doing is enough.

When we have erred by doing for ourselves what God would do for us, the grace of Christ will still catch us when we fall.