

Sermon by Audrey Klein-Leach, Ninth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B

Open our minds so that we may receive Your eternal wisdom.

Open our spirits so that we may know Your leading and guidance.

And open our hearts so that we may receive Your wonderful love. Amen

Today's Biblical readings lay bare a stark dichotomy about leadership and about how one's actions have a direct affect on outcomes. In our Old Testament lesson, David's misuse of power leads to death – literal and figurative; while the passage from John's Gospel shows how faith can lead to an abundance that one never could have imagined.

A few weeks ago, we heard the story of David and Goliath. In that reading, a young, righteous – and by righteous I mean “right” with God – David, persuades Saul that he *can* kill Goliath – and then he actually *does*. In today's Old Testament reading and those leading up to today, we follow David as he grows older and more powerful. As that happens, he slowly strays from that right relationship with God. The use of his gifts rather than being used to build up a people are used instead to serve only his needs, desires and wishes. In this passage, David demands and takes what he wants – in this case, the beautiful, but married, Bathsheba. And he does what *he* wants to do – has sex with her, impregnates her and then rather admitting his wrongs, has her husband, a good man, a loyal soldier who serves David without question – murdered.

David goes from being a leader fighting alongside his soldiers to one distanced from them preferring the comforts of Jerusalem, the kingdom's capital, instead of the grim realities of the battlefield. David acts as if the kingdom God has entrusted to his care and stewardship is something *he's* responsible for creating, not YHWH.

As John mentioned in his sermon the other week, the Apostle Paul tells us that we know a true prophet or leader from a false prophet or leader by their *actions*. David is often referred to as the "ideal King" and yet David's actions in this passage are far from ideal. Various Biblical translations use different words, but today's translation uses the phrase "to get her". It is unclear whether what transpired between David and Bathsheba was consensual or nonconsensual, but regardless, it was immoral. In the society of her time, Bathsheba had no choice but to obey David. You cannot sugar coat David's actions or rewrite history. What David did was wrong and at his very core he knew it. In subsequent passages we will hear how others call David to task, but that is not part of our reading today.

Now let's turn our attention to the Gospel reading and a very different example of leadership. In this famous passage, Jesus feeds 5000 people. The feeding of a multitude is one of the few stories that appears in all four Gospels, which points to its significance. In this passage, we are told Jesus resists the call of the crowd to "take him by force to make him king" and instead withdraws, but not before feeding them.

Unlike David, Jesus chooses the moral path. He uses his gifts to heal and feed. He resists the temptation, although he surely felt it, to pander to his own vanity or the need to be recognized as “great,” “powerful” “a King”.

How we use the gifts we are given whether for good or ill is a core message of Scripture. As Frederick Buechner in his sermon entitled, *The Challenge to Surrender* says – and please excuse the pronouns, it is an older text:

“man’s most absolute power...is his power to destroy...Anyone can do it: can destroy an animal, a bird, an object, an enemy or a friend, himself, Jesus Christ...The power of man consists of his ability to create and destroy for good or evil...Man cannot achieve love, generate love, wield love...because whenever love enters this world, God enters. Love makes it happen not coercively, but by creating a situation in which, of our own free will, we want to be what loves wants us to be.

Jesus acting out of love for those gathered results in everyone eating and enjoying “as much as they wanted.” And when the leftovers are gathered it fills 12 baskets – are far cry from the five loaves and two fish with which they started.

Two other important points about John’s Gospel; only John mentions that it is a *boy* who had the loaves and fishes and when asked, gives of them freely. I can just picture the event. Thousands of people mulling around. None of the adults or disciples have a clue how they were going to solve the dilemma of feeding so many with nothing. Jesus knows they are clueless as well - as the passage says, “He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do.” So what is the importance of it being a child who gave so freely?

Throughout the Gospels Jesus reminds his followers to encounter the world through the eyes of a child rather than those of an adult. Why? Children tend to

trust, hope, believe that there will always be enough, while adults tend to approach situations thinking and acting as if there will *never* be enough no matter how much is given.

This important message appears not only in Scripture, but throughout literature. My husband and I recently watched the Netflix series “Anne with an E”. It is a coming of age story based on Anne of Green Gables. Anne confronts the injustices of the world in which she operates. She sees a world that needs changing, that doesn’t make sense. And often, she sees and confronts adults who seems to be making choices and doing actions based on their own selfish needs. The consequences of those selfish actions not only negatively affect the individuals involved but also ripple through the community. With the clarity of youth, Anne is outraged by what she perceives as injustice and hypocrisy – and she says so. By shining a spotlight on what she sees, Anne brings focus and leadership that has a *positive* effect of building up individuals and the greater community.

Another interesting detail in today’s Gospel is that John specifically says the bread is made from barley. Barley was a primary food grain in ancient Israel. It is one of the first things to sprout in the spring. It grows in poor soil, is dependable and has less gluten than wheat, *and* is actually more nutritious than wheat. Jesus is feeding the multitude on many levels – spiritually through his healing and by sharing bread which is sustainable and nutritious.

So today’s readings provide us with important food for thought for our lives. Do we want to continue in habits that are bad for us nutritionally and spiritually? To

which leadership model do we aspire? That of David or that of Jesus? The pandemic has put some of this in a stark contrast for us. Pre-COVID, we were a country already inclined to self-absorption. For some, COVID provided a perfect storm where self-absorption reigned. It is one of many hidden emotional costs of the pandemic. And what is self-absorption's power? It creates a distortion leading us, like David, to think we're the center of everything. The consequence is that it leaves little or no room for empathy or a desire to seek understanding about others thoughts, needs and wishes. We aren't meant to be like that so it leads to depression, anger, anxiety – all of which clinical psychologists say they are seeing on a dramatic scale across all age groups, but among adolescents in particular. *We have choices.* We are a people called to share bread with one another, to trust one another, to love one another. I aspire – and I can assure you I have a long way to go - to be more like Jesus and Anne and the young boy, to view the world more through the eyes of a wondrous child than a jaded adult. I invite you to join me. Amen.