

June 24, 2018
1 Samuel 17:57-18:16
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“Choose Joy”

Good morning! I’ve connected with a couple of old friends in the past few weeks. They’re kind of related to each other, only one is a person and one is a book. The person is someone that I want to college with at Manchester -- back in the days when it was a college. We weren’t especially close at Manchester, in fact, she probably knew Tim better than she knew me since they both grew up in Wabash County. But she was one of the only people I knew who lived in Goshen when I moved to Goshen in 1995, and she had kids the same age as my older two kids. We hung out a lot in those early years before our kids went to different schools and we each got busy with activities and jobs. We re-connected when she moved recently, and when I walked through her new house several weeks ago, I was surprised and touched to see some of my framed lettering art displayed. I’d forgotten that I’d even done it or given it to her.

One of the pieces was a little tree in the style of a woodcut, and although I had done it, I remembered that I had borrowed it from somewhere else: a book called *Simple Abundance: A Daybook of Comfort and Joy*. I had lost track of my original copy, so I found another one. Are any of you familiar with this book? It was first published in 1995, I discovered it a year or two later when I had three young children, and was in the midst of the special kind of brain-mushiness that comes from interacting with toddlers all day and being chronically sleep-deprived. It was an influential book for me at the time, and I was happy to re-visit it as an old friend as I contemplated the ways in which friendship and memory and stress and joy can all show up in the same place.

It turns out that our text from 1 Samuel 17 and 18 incorporates some of those same themes of friendship and stress and joy, and even

presents them in the same bewildering proximity to one another. As we finish up our Pentecost reflections on the question What is the Spirit up to? and move into discernment of our ministry at Creekside, I think this passage from 1 Samuel can give us some food for thought. This passage is, of course, part of a larger story, a story which we've been dipping into for the entire month of June. We began with Samuel's call from God when he was a boy, living in the Temple with Eli. That call was to do a difficult thing, and Samuel had to figure that out for himself. Last week we met Samuel all grown up, a man who spent his entire life serving the people of Israel as judge and communicating God's words to them. The people have decided, against God's better judgment, that they want a king, so Samuel anoints Saul as king. God later regrets that God ever made Saul the king, and instructs Samuel to go to Jesse the Bethlehemite, and anoint one of his sons to be the new king of Israel.

Of course, Saul is still in power as king and David is still a young man who is still watching his father's sheep. David is not ready to take power, and Saul is certainly not willing to give it up. Saul doesn't even know that David has been anointed to be king, but we're told that God's spirit is now resting mightily on David, and God's spirit has departed from Saul. So what is the Spirit up to? The Spirit is empowering what God, through Samuel, has chosen and anointed. David Son of Nobody in Particular has a wildly successful debut as a warrior. A huge warrior from Philista named Goliath has been terrorizing the Israeli army. There's a bit of dialog from Chapter 17 that is too good to pass up: Jesse sends David with some food for his older brothers who are fighting with the forces of Israel. As David arrives in camp, he hears the soldiers saying that King Saul has offered a huge reward to whoever can kill Goliath, including marrying Saul's daughter. This is like a fairy tale and killing the giant, right? David sidles up to the soldiers and asks, What is the king going to do for the guy who kills Goliath and restores the honor of Israel? And his older brother sees David talking to the soldiers and says, "What are you doing here ya little twerp? Who's watching Dad's sheep while you pester these fighting men? You just came down here hoping to see the battle." And David replies (and I'm quoting 17:29 here) "What have I done now? It was only a question."

You know how that story ends. David uses his mad skills with a sling to kill the giant Goliath, the rest of the Philistines flee in terror, Israel wins a great battle, the king is impressed and grateful, and David is rewarded and marries the king's daughter. That's what the Spirit is up to, right? Making sure the good guy wins and everybody lives happily ever after? Not exactly. It turns out that David's story is much more of a human story than it is a fairy tale. Before David wins the heart of Saul's daughter, he wins the heart of Saul's son, Jonathan. The two become friends in a way which will complicate their lives and ultimately save them. David is offered the hand of Saul's daughter in marriage, but not until David brings Saul the foreskin of 100 Philistines. Eew. No man is going to part with that without a fight; killing 100 Philistines is a condition of marriage that's calculated to get David killed. Because although Saul initially took a liking to the boy, that turned sour pretty quick. In fact, as soon as the women of Israel heard about the death of Goliath and the defeat of the Philistines and came out dancing and singing and sang "Saul has killed his thousands and David his ten thousands!"

So here's where I want to focus on what the Spirit is up to, in part because it's a message I need to hear. The Spirit is inspiring joy. The celebration of the women of Israel who recognize the success of God's people and the Spirit's power which rests upon David. It's going to get complicated -- this whole mess of David and Saul and Saul's son Jonathan and daughter Michal. Joy doesn't mean that everyone lives happily ever after, joy is a recognition that Spirit is at work within our lives. I walked into the kitchen at Creekside this week and saw a big tote bag with the words Choose Joy printed on it. I thought that sentiment was appropriate, because I believe that although we can't always choose our circumstances, we can choose how we respond to them. I have known people whose personal mantras could be Choose Negativity or Choose Defensiveness, but I think the Spirit is leading us to choose joy.

There's been some challenging stuff at the McFadden household this week: mechanical issues which have led to unexpected financial commitments, family struggles which have led to some soul-searching. In short, it's been a typical week. There's never a week goes by that there isn't something. I can choose to focus on those things. If someone asks, "How was your week?" I can tell them about

the car repairs and the air conditioner going out, and all the other things that have been difficult. That stuff is true, and I could probably justifiably make a case for how difficult my life is. But if I focus on what has gone or is in the process of going wrong, it actually diminishes my ability to appreciate a lot of wonderful things which happened this week. Stuff that went right, by no action of mine: kids at Creekside learning Bible verses and songs, a misty morning to enjoy some peaceful time in the garden, the chance to laugh with my children, a magical evening on Lake Michigan. It turns out I can make a very convincing case that my life is filled with blessings. Maybe you think the things I mentioned are small stuff, but that's the stuff which allows me to choose joy, and that's a big deal.

Let me say just a few words about what choosing joy is not. Choosing joy is not choosing denial. The mechanical and personal issues still need to be dealt with, or they become even bigger mechanical and personal issues. Choosing joy does not mean that your problems will melt away, but joy can give us strength to face those problems, instead of complaining that no one has solved them for us. Choosing joy can help us to keep fear from overwhelming us, and can give us courage and imagination to face whatever it is that we are called to do. This daybook of comfort and joy reminded me of a time in my life which was very challenging and very rewarding, and the friendships on which I relied to get me through. It reminded me that joy grounds us in the everyday, and that gratitude is the perspective we need to get through the challenges which will inevitably happen.

Part of what I have appreciated about reading and studying 1 Samuel is how human and authentic this biblical narrative is. We're told that God's Spirit was upon David mightily, and that David was successful in whatever he did. David experienced and expressed and embodied joy, and yet David did not have a simple or painless life. The Spirit led David to success, and that success became very complicated: just verses after David and nearly everybody else in Israel is celebrating victory over the Philistines, Saul tries to pin him to the wall with his spear.

When we are following the leading of the Spirit, The Spirit has a way of putting us in places where we have to work really hard, and do things which take us out of our comfort zone. Painful and difficult

things happen: we need to acknowledge those things, face those things and choose joy. Because in the midst of those struggles there is blessing, and that blessing is what the Spirit is up to if we are willing to be open to it.

See if this week you can share some of that joy with someone else, with a kind word, a card, a text message. I get this from folks at Creekside all the time -- more than I appreciate and certainly more than I deserve. I know some of you intentionally share joy in the way you interact with clients or patients or friends. Choosing joy is not just a nice thing to do, it is a spiritual discipline which shapes who we are and how we experience life; choosing joy is a statement about God's goodness, even in circumstances which are beyond our control. God is good. All the time. Choose joy. Amen.