

Righteous and Risky Rummaging Tearing and Weaving



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1 Samuel 15:10-23

Summer is almost gone. You can feel it in the night chill that sends us stretching for the blanket bunched up at the foot of the bed. You can see it in the browning of the woodland undergrowth and the hint of blush in the early maples. You can hear it in the crashing of helmets and grunting of bodies colliding as baseball yields the field to football.

I'm not much of a warm weather person, but I have to say I am not ready for summer to be gone yet. I'm not ready to go back to wearing socks and shoes all the time. I much prefer the simple summer wardrobe of shorts, t-shirts and sandals. I'm not ready to give up relaxing afternoons sitting on the beach at Lake Michigan with a good summer novel, digging my feet into the golden sand and listening to the rhythmic sound of water lapping at the shoreline. I'm not ready for my wife's summer recess from the classroom to end. It has been really nice having Patrice home with me on Monday's when I take my day off from work.

Summer is almost gone and I suspect that most of us are feeling a bit reluctant to move on. We aren't ready to give up the relaxed pace of summer that balances the demands of work with time for leisure, recreation and vacation. We aren't ready to have the darkness of night encroach on our long summer evenings when we have been enjoying lingering outside in the yard visiting with family, friends and neighbors. We aren't ready to close up the house to ward off the chill of the night air. In early July, summer stretched out endlessly before us, but now at the end of August summer is all but gone.

Endings are hard for us, not just the end of a season, but the end of any experience we have valued and enjoyed. The end of a visit, the end of a relationship, the end of a career, and the end of a life...endings are hard for us. We tend to want

to stretch things out longer than they can be stretched. We linger with memories of experiences we have cherished and are hesitant to leave them behind and move on. Saying goodbye makes our eyes well up with tears and we feel a wave of regret wash over us as we release each other from our farewell embraces.

This morning our biblical text is the story of an ending. It tells of the end of King Saul's reign. Saul was the first person ever anointed to rule as king over the people of Israel. Ever since Moses liberated them from their slavery in Egypt, all throughout their wilderness wanderings and for generations after Joshua led them across the Jordan River to take possession of the Promised Land, the Israelites had functioned as a loose federation of tribes. They were unified, not by a king, but by their faith. God was their king. In times of crisis, charismatic leaders temporarily stepped forward to rally the people in the face of some common threat. In the Old Testament record, those leaders are referred to as the Judges. They were not judicial authorities the way we think of judges today. They were charismatic leaders who stepped forward in times of crisis and then melded back into the general population once the danger had passed.

But as the people of Israel continued to multiply and expand their lands and build permanent communities, the loose tribal federation was becoming inadequate. They needed a more unified and centralized government. They needed a leader who could impose a uniform and consistent code of laws and command a national army strong enough to defend them against their enemies. They needed a king.

Saul was the person chosen by God and anointed by the prophet Samuel to reign as the first King of Israel. At the beginning of his reign he enjoyed the enthusiastic support of his subjects. Soldiers were willing to follow him into battle. It was the beginning of a new era in the history of the people of Israel. His success in battle inspired

confidence in his leadership. Under Saul's command the Israelites won many battles over the Moabites, the Amalekites and the Philistines who had been terrorizing the Israelites with brutal acts of violence.

But the end of Saul's reign was at hand. The needs and circumstances of the nation had changed. Instead of a field marshal who could command soldiers in battle, the Israelites needed a visionary leader, a poet, a writer of songs who could stir their hearts and unite them in peace. The time had come for the mantle of leadership to be transferred from Saul to David.

Samuel, the prophet who had anointed Saul to reign as the first king of Israel was sent by God to inform the king that he would no longer reign with God's blessing. It was a hard message to deliver. Samuel knew that Saul would be devastated by the news. The text tells us that after the prophet delivered his message to the king, "Samuel grieved over Saul."

Saul wasn't ready to abdicate his throne. He acknowledged that he made a mistake by allowing his soldiers to keep the plunders of war when they defeated the Amalekites and showed mercy to their captured King, but surely that didn't negate all of the good he had done. Surely after all the times he had risked his life in battle for the sake of the nation, Saul deserved to remain on the throne.

After Samuel delivered the bad news he turned to leave, but Saul reached out and grabbed hold of the hem of the prophet's robe desperately trying to keep him from leaving until he could talk the prophet into changing his mind. But instead, Samuel's robe tore as the king clung to it and that tearing signified the end of Saul's rule. Samuel turned to the king and said: "The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this very day."

For the past few weeks we've been spending time with

Phyllis Tickle's book the Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why.

Phyllis Tickle is a historian of the Christian tradition. She points out that the fabric of the church has been torn in our time. The church that grew out of the 16th century reformation is in tatters today, and a new expression of Christianity is beginning to emerge. The church that was fractured by denominational differences five hundred years ago is being rewoven as a church without denominational distinctions. The traditions that once differentiated one denomination from another are now being integrated in the lives of congregations that are seeking to embrace the truths to be found in all of our traditions. The authority of scripture no longer speaks alone but now speaks in dialogue with the authority of biology, cosmology, genetics and quantum physics. As the twentieth century theologian Karl Barth famously insisted, today theology must be done, "... with the bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other."

Five hundred years ago, Gutenberg's movable type shifted the locus of authority in the church from the ordained priesthood to the priesthood of all believers. Instead of the clergy being the only ones who had the word of God and knew the word of God and were the word of God, the printing press put the word of God directly into the hands of every believer. Today the World Wide Web has expanded the circle even further, bringing Christians into faithful dialogue with all of the world religions, cultures and philosophies.

The Good News of the gospel of Jesus Christ remains the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, but the torn fabric of the church is being rewoven into a new garment. New liturgies, new expressions of sacred music, new technologies for sharing the ancient truths of our faith, new structures for organizing our life together as communities of faith, new ways of building networks of fellowship and community are changing the way we do church in the 21st

century.

One age of Christianity is ending and a new age is emerging. Endings are always hard for us. We are reluctant to let go of the things we have known and cherished. We want to hold on and stretch things out longer than they can be stretched. But the tear has already occurred. The garment cannot be mended. We can no more restore the church of the twentieth century than Luther, Calvin or Zwingli could restore the pre-reformation church of the 15th century.

What we can do is remain engaged in this vitally important conversation of faith. What we can do is continue working to shape the new form of the emerging Christian Church. What we can do is prevent the church of the twenty-first century from so insulating itself from the changing culture that it becomes irrelevant and incapable of speaking the truth of God's Word in a way that people can hear and understand today. What we can do is conserve what is most sacred in our tradition in order to insure that the church does not lose its foundation in the three great loves: the love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self because, as Jesus once said, "on these depend all of the laws and the prophets."

Amen.

