

## ***When We Get What We Think We Want***

*a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on June 6, 2021*

*based on 1Samuel 8: 4-22a*

Daniel Gilbert, author of *Stumbling on Happiness*, posits that it is the ambition of every psychologist to one day finish the following sentence: “The human being is the only animal that . . . “

He tells us how wrong other psychologists before him have been when they have finished that sentence with words like, ““The human being is the only animal that *can use language*,” since some great apes, like the late beloved gorilla, Koko, can use *sign* language. He also tells us how wrong some psychologists have been who finished the sentence with the words, ““The human being is the only animal that *can use tools*,” since a growing number of creatures have shown they can be ingenious in manipulating elements of nature to get any number of things they need.

Then Gilbert goes ahead and courageously finishes it – “The human being is the only animal that . . . . *thinks about the future*.

Here is what he says after that – “I’ve had cats, I’ve had dogs, I’ve had gerbils, mice, goldfish, and crabs, and I do recognize that nonhuman animals often *act* as if they have the capacity to think about the future, but . . . until a chimp weeps at the thought of growing old alone, or smiles as it contemplates its summer vacation, or turns down a *Fudgsicle* because it already looks too fat in shorts,

I will stand by my version of the Sentence. We think about the future in a way that no other animal can, does, or ever has, and this simple ubiquitous, ordinary act is a defining feature of our humanity.”

We have this ability, he says, because we have a prefrontal cortex in our brain, which lets us project ourselves through imagination into the future.

Something Gilbert goes to great pains to prove is that that prefrontal cortex often gets us into trouble because though we can imagine what will make us happy, it often goes wrong in its assessment and we end up miserable – miserable with choices we make that we were often 100% sure would be the best ones for us.

Now, it’s true, we make better choices when we are older than younger – divorce statistics are very clear about this, but at any age we can mess up big-time when we make choices. Life is almost always more complex than we realize.

The story we heard this morning from the Hebrew Testament tells us of a decision the whole nation of Israel made that seemed awfully good at the time.

This occurred when the people of Israel were ruled by Judges who, when they were operating according to the best practices of the day, they consulted a God they called, *Yahweh* before leading the people.

But instead of being proud of this unique system, the people saw how most of the judges, seeking to streamline things, ended up cutting out the God part, and the consequences were troubling.

In this morning's Hebrew text they decide they want a king so that they can be, you know, like all the other nations around them.

In this, they are so like a young child whose parents are so proud of him when he is 5. He goes his own way, but it's okay because he trusts instincts which are very much informed by his parents superior wisdom.

Then, when he turns 11 he throws that all overboard when some charismatic 13 year old pied-piper comes along. Very quickly he becomes a different kid.

Well, the impulse of the Hebrew people to have a king did not begin during the judgeship of Samuel, who plays a big part in the story today. It came along long before.

In the earlier *Book of Judges*, a hero named Gideon proved to be a military genius. As a result the people urged him to accept a crown. But Gideon proved to be as wise as he was courageous, knowing that no mortal could live up to such a high ideal. "I will not rule over you," he said, and my son will not rule over you either. Our God is our king."

Then, as if to prove the point, Gideon's son, Abimelech, cruelly grasped after the throne his father had rejected and brought tragedy down upon himself and many others.

Well, the sting of that lesson apparently wore off fairly quickly.

*So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead<sup>l</sup> us, like all the other nations have."*

The leaders of the people come to Samuel, and they say, "Hey, we notice that you're nearly 80 and the opposition party is always parsing everything you say, looking for signs of dementia. And your son was once involved in some ventures overseas that are chronically mentioned in the news. Howabout we cut to the chase and get a leader who wants to be a king so we can be like Russia and a bunch of other oligarchies where power is passed on, father to offspring no matter what?"

Here's the text again ...

*But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. And the LORD told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights.*

So here's the deal, God will give the people their heart's desire, but first they will need to hear from the current judge concerning how it will truly, you know, work out.

I remember a lovely woman friend back in graduate school who, at 25 told me something very interesting in the wake of some marital troubles she'd had.

She'd gotten married at 23 because she had been so charmed by the weddings of a half dozen of her friends. She'd felt left out. So, she found a good looking guy and in short-order they had a lovely ceremony.

Here is what she said to me, "You know, you often get what you want in life, and then you're stuck with it."

Well, here's how the warning sounded coming from Samuel's lips. These are some of the most profound words in the whole Bible, it would be good for us to hear them one more time –

*Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, "This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the LORD will not answer you in that day."*

*But the people refused to listen to Samuel. "No!" they said. "We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles."*

Right. A king who will fight all their battles for them? Good luck with that!

Remember how our last President egged on his insurrectionist followers on January 6<sup>th</sup> – exactly 5 months ago today, sending them to the Capitol building and saying, "I'll be there with you." Sure he would.

Do the people who still idolize him remember that?

*When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the LORD. The LORD answered, "Listen to them and give them a king."*

You know, we can tell our children not to stick their fingers in the fan but most of the time they will have to find out for themselves that it's a bad idea.

Oscar Wilde once said, "It is perfectly possible to get what you think you want [in life] and be miserable ... In this world, there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it."

Which is just another way of saying what we all know – that happiness is never having what you want. It's wanting what you have.

In a TED TALK, Dan Gilbert (who wrote the happiness book I spoke of at the beginning of my sermon) asks this question. "Do you suppose a person who wins \$43 million dollars in the New York State Lottery is happier, a year after winning, than a paraplegic a year after his accident? Of course you do. But you're wrong, because statistical analysis has shown that a year after those very different events, their happiness level is measurably the same. Circumstance has little to do with happiness."

Cathy Smith of Scottsdale, Arizona might be exhibit A in this regard. Listen to what she says about this --

*After ten years of having metastatic breast cancer, I've gotten pretty good at minimizing my condition. I started out thinking, "At least I don't have ovarian cancer." When it metastasized to my skull, I was glad it wasn't in my brain. Finally, when my condition became worse than everyone else's I knew, I embraced my doctor's advice about not comparing cancers: they are all different.*

*Some of my relatives and friends, God bless them, have a perverse way of trying to provide solace: they share with me stories about other peoples' misfortunes that are worse than mine. As if someone else's trouble were my gain. What I need is another kind of solace, something less combative, more poetic. This is what I have in mind:*

*I'm a practicing Jew, and every Passover, we recite a humbling prayer called Dayenu, which thanks God for the small favors that mean everything. The word dayenu means "it would have been enough," and the prayer goes like this:*

*"If God had parted the Red Sea, but not ensured safe passage, dayenu. If God had brought us into the desert, but had not led us into the Promised Land, dayenu." The point is that, every step of the way, we give thanks to God for getting us this far.*

*If, after the cancer had spread to my bones, the Tamoxifen hadn't worked for me, dayenu. If I'd been given the abdominal injection called Zoladec, but not the yew-tree-based taxol chemotherapy, dayenu. Will God's mercy never end?*

*Miraculously, I have lived ten years with an incurable, life-threatening disease. During this period, I've met and married a wonderful man. I've lived to see my daughter give birth to two grandchildren. And the current treatment allows me to keep my hair blowing in the wind. It's enough.*

I find that very powerful, coming as it does from someone who has drawn such a difficult hand. Well, most of us are not like Cathy Smith, I'm afraid. Most of us look at the state of our life today and count up our regrets and overlook most of our blessings. Some of us are actually trapped by regret. "Oh, if only that one thing had worked out differently," we might say. Or, "If only I had made a different choice back when I was 21."

This is precisely what happened to the Hebrew people in the time of the Judge Samuel. Remember? All they could see was the shadow side of the bargain they'd made with God – a bargain that had, in fact, made them a totally unique people, ruled as they were, not by a king, but by judges.

I guess they had expected everything to be perfect or something, and when it wasn't perfect, they decided to bail on the original bargain. Decided to throw away what made them special. Maybe our expectations are the problem. It's been said that expectations are merely resentments under construction.

Garrison Keillor was retired a few years ago due to bad behavior, but let's not forget he said a few wise things way back when. One was this ....

"Some luck lies in *not* getting what you thought you wanted but getting what you have, which once you have it, you may be smart enough to see is what you would have wanted had you known." (in *Lake Wobegon Days*).

Our friends in AA know all about this business – allow me to close with a version of the prayer they pray every time they meet?

God grant me the serenity  
to accept the things I cannot change;  
the courage to change the things I can;  
and the wisdom to know the difference.

May this be true for all of us. Amen