

“The Spiritual Discipline of Remembrance”

by Rev. Don Luwig - October 17, 2021

1 Samuel 8:4-21a; Excerpt from “Who Stole My Bible” - Rev. Jenifer Butler

What We Think We Want is Not What We Need

Sometimes what we think we want is not what we need. I graduated from college in 1987 and took a position as youth director in Sandpoint Idaho in a Lutheran Church. I ended up spending 5 years there—most of it just growing up and learning how to function in a mostly middle-class community. I remember spending a lot of my free time by the lake or the river contemplating my future. Worried. Anxious. Afraid. I had no idea where my life was headed. I felt alone. I felt that the world was passing me by. Nearly all of my friends from college had gotten married—in fact I was the Best Man at three different weddings in three years and attended several others. Even though I had dated a couple of times, nothing really connected long-term. Even still, I wanted to be like everyone else and get married. I sometimes wondered if maybe I was destined for a life of being single.

I imagine that my experience was similar to what the Israelites experienced in the time of the judges. They wanted what others had. They wanted a king. God offers freedom and liberation, to be ruled by Judges rather than a king, yet in fear and frustration, we often choose the ways of the world. We choose autocracy rather than doing the hard work of democracy; we choose the devil we know rather than the God we don't.

Six times. In our reading from 1 Samuel, the phrase “he will take” is used six times. Six specific warnings - the King “will take” all these things from you. You will lose your freedom and liberty. And yet, the Israelites were not deterred. Their minds were made up.. They had convinced themselves that there were greener pastures on the other side. If only they had a king. If only. If only. And yet, we learn later that as Rabbi Nahuman Ward-Lev writes, “by the eighth century BCE, a time of prosperity in Israel and Judah, the disparity between the rich and the poor had become even worse than during the time of the Judges,” The society that had once embraced God's liberating vision for the world was headed down the road to autocracy.

How many times have we said that to ourselves? If only I had this or that, then my life would be better. If only. There is something about us humans, history teaches, that compels us to be ruled by a King rather than doing the hard work of shared power. It is easier to be told what to do than having to figure it out on our own. There is something about us humans that makes us always attracted to the other side. To the “better” life.

Blinded by our Own Bias

But so often it turns out to be worse. Of the 7 close friends that I remember getting married between the ages of 19-24, a time that I wanted to be like them, only two of them are married

today. The other five discovered that marriage takes commitment and settling down and an added set of rules and expectations that they were not ready for. They were blinded by attraction with seemingly little depth in their relationship. How often do we become blinded by our own inability to see the big picture or the ramifications of our choices? How often do we not recognize our own hidden bias? Harvard University has put out a bunch of tests for people to discover their hidden bias. It is called the *Implicit Association Test*. I encourage you to google it and test your own implicit bias on whole range of topics: From Arab-Muslim, Race, Sexuality, Presidents, Weapons, 14 topics in total: a required assignment for my students in many of my Sociology classes.

We so often are unaware of our hidden bias. We become ignorant of how our actions—our words—impact those around us. I remember my ignorance on one of my early dates with Kathy. I discovered that she loved pistachios. I didn't ever have them while growing up and don't remember ever eating them but I do like nuts. So one night, I cooked dinner for us and made a cake for dessert. Without realizing that pistachios needed to be de-shelled before eating them, I mixed them in the cake batter with the shell on and baked the cake. When it came time for dessert, you should have seen Kathy's face as she started crunching into all of the pistachios. Needless to say, to this day, I have never made another cake. Kathy won't let me. Our hidden bias and unawareness can so easily become our own ignorance when we only allow our emotions or limited experiences to guide our actions.

Our World Today: The Battle for the Soul of America

We see this being played out in our country too. So much bias. So many who want a king. And here we are again in 2021 repeating history it would seem. The One/Six Insurrection and attack on our capital is the result of a failing democracy and a broken America. If only. We know our social reality all too well: a growing economic inequality, wealth concentrated in white communities, the erosion of voting rights and gerrymandering run amuck, mass incarceration, increased school segregation, the influence of big money in politics, the devastation done to our planet. And so many Americans want a King to deliver us from these injustices.

We are not alone. Authoritarianism is rising throughout the world. We are certainly in a battle for the soul of America and perhaps even the world. This battle is occurring on our doorsteps without most of us paying too much attention. One example of this is school districts around the country and even Oregon electing conservative School Board members who are banning “Critical Race Theory” in the curriculum.

Well, what is Critical Race Theory anyways? I would love to facilitate a deeper discussion but simply put, Critical race theory simply attempts to teach history without blinders on—without bias. It is a theory that acknowledges the structural and systemic realities of racism in our country and throughout our history.. It is a call to recognize issues of power that have led to the

haves and the have nots. And yet, every call for equality in our country has been framed by the ultra conservative right as requiring a loss for the white community. Equality is seen as a threat to those in power—and that of course means—a threat to white people. Think of the way affirmative action is discussed in the public square today—and the way some white folks believe they are the ones now being discriminated against.

We are supposed to be a democratic America. We are supposed to share power. We are supposed to hold up liberty and justice for all—to be a *Shining City on the Hill* as Ronald Reagan framed it. Yet, Political scientists tell us that for the most part, democracies are dying slow, quiet deaths these days. They “erode slowly in barely visible steps,” according to Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt in *How Democracies Die*.

Striving toward the Democratic Ideals

So how do we respond to this climate of fear and “if only?” How do we hold on to democracy? We must begin by remembering. We must heed the warnings that history teaches us and do what the Israelites did not do. We must use the many examples of history and recommit ourselves to shared governance and developing diverse coalitions.

An excellent example of this is shared by the Rev. Jennifer Butler (*In Who Stole My Bible?*): “John Lewis did not know when he marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on Bloody Sunday that he would live to be a congressman or that the act would lead to passage of the Voting Rights Act.” ... She continues, “When we dig deep into history, we learn from the bravery, the strategies, and the shortcomings of those who went before us”.

The Spiritual Discipline of Remembrance

Where do we look for the lenses that lead to liberation and democracy—not for some of us—but for all of us? Dr. King, writing shortly before his death, after the victories that dismantled legal apartheid in America, wrote a book entitled, “Where do we go from here? Chaos or Community”. Dr. King writes,

“First, we must massively assert our dignity and worth.
We must stand up amidst a system
That still oppresses
And develop an unassailable and
Majestic sense of values...”

An unassailable and majestic sense of values... King calls us to be clearer and clearer about what is important—what is spiritually important to us. It was a call to remember what we care enough about to risk our lives for—and why. Dr. King talked about “remembrance” as a spiritual discipline, even before he talked about love and about power -- he talked about remembrance. We

need to remember our past without blinders, recognizing our own hidden bias and confronting the systems that we help to perpetuate. We need to talk about how to deal with the divides in this nation—how we talk across, and walk across and work across the aisle—how we find ways to make common cause. We need to have those conversations.

Shining City on a Hill

I heard a report over the weekend about the money distributed by the Federal Government in the Covid Rescue Plan—especially the payments to families with young children, the Child Tax Credits. It is estimated that those payments will cut the rate of child poverty dramatically in this country and leave fewer families living below the poverty level than ever before. I heard that report and found myself applauding that positive progress. But also so angry that we have been willing to leave so many families with so many children behind...for so long...

Where do we go from here as a nation? As individuals? As a church? That depends on our ability to remember. Jennifer Butler exhorts, “God gave us the spiritual discipline of remembrance to interrupt the dangerous slide into authoritarianism.” We must take heed of the historical warnings that are all around us. We must remember. We must deshell the nuts before putting them in the cake.

I am glad that I waited for marriage until I was the ripe old age of 25. Sometimes what we think we want is not what we need. I learned that patience is truly a virtue. I had discovered a lot about myself and was better prepared for the work that was ahead of me—for 30 years of marriage. As a church and a Nation, God calls us to have historical empathy—we are called to be a shining city on a hill—not ruled by a King—but by and for each other. It is time to live up to that calling.

A-men.