

A SMOOTH RIVER STONE
June 20, 2009

1 Samuel 17: 32-49; 2 Corinthians: 1-13; Mark 4: 35-41

This morning's reading from Samuel tells the wonderful story of David and Goliath, and we read it traditionally as a story of the power that faith gives to the efforts of those who attempt to surmount the most formidable of obstacles. And, indeed, it is that story. We hear David say it himself when he tells Goliath that he comes to battle with him not with a sword and a spear and javelin, but in the name of the Lord. But, the story is perhaps even more iconic as *the* representation of how the little guy can beat the establishment. We see it mentioned over and over again in sports and business and political competitions, and it refers to disparities in money and influence and achievement as well as to those of physical size.

I once read a piece by Malcolm Gladwell, the journalist cum sociologist who coined the phrase "tipping point" and who has written a number of books. In this piece, he alludes to David and Goliath when he talks about a high school girls' basketball team. This team is made up of small girls who don't really know how to play the game very well, who like to read and who dream of

growing up to be marine biologists. Their coach is the father of one of the players, a man who grew up in India playing cricket and soccer and who had never in his life played basketball. And the girls win, often and reliably. Here's a clue: Gladwell's piece tells us that the coach, a software engineer, came to the US from Mumbai with \$50 in his pocket, and he didn't give up easily. He teaches them to play basketball the way that people play soccer, to use the full court all the time, to press the opposite team all the time, not just when they are in opponent's territory and close to the basket. And he teaches them endurance too, for that is not a restful way to play the game. And, they go to the nationals.

The point that Gladwell makes about this team of small girls is the same one that he makes about David and Goliath. It is that the underdog can't play the game the way that it's traditionally played. The underdog has to challenge the favorite with a different game.

I have always thought that the most moving part of the David and Goliath story is that he tries the traditional tools of this game that he has to play, the armor and the helmet and the sword, and realizes that he can't use them. "I cannot walk with these," he says, "for I am not used to them." And he chooses instead to go up against Goliath with the tools that made him so confident in the

first place, his slingshot with river stones and his speed and agility. It makes me think of the refrain from the hymn, “Just as I am.” He is going to fight this battle, “Just as I am, Lord, just as I am.” And, of course, he wins, and so do many underdogs win, and so does the girls’ basketball team win, at least until the very end when the defending champion learns to play the game on their terms. So we learn from this story to value ourselves for what is intrinsic to our nature or our background, to understand that it can be those very characteristics, perhaps initially viewed as handicaps, that will give us an advantage after all.

Now let’s look at another character in this story. It may be that many of us feel less like David, challenging the giant, than like Saul, of whom it is said, “Now the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him.” Many of us must know that feeling of having once had power, of whatever sort, and of lamenting its ebb, being uncomfortable in its absence. Sometimes the lack of it may give rise to an evil spirit within is, of complaint and suspicion. What of Goliath or the Philistines who played their game very well and with success for a long time? They must have thought, “Wait a second, this isn’t right!” What about all the teams who played the girls with their full court press, who said, “This isn’t how to play the game... this isn’t fair.” So

many times we've felt we knew how to play the game, confident in our power, knowing the rules, knowing even, maybe, how to get around the rules, and then something changes. It's not the same anymore... it's not fair. We are told all the time that things change faster and faster as the generations proceed. We can't rely on the same skills that we learned in the beginning to carry us through and onward, for it is always changing. We have to be changing to, and realize that there are others who have a place on the playing field as well.

So, this being Father's Day, let us look at Saul and David. Saul is not David's father, of course, but in some ways, he behaves toward him as a father would. He seems to have affection for David, and who would not have affection for that sturdy boy, after David says, "The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of the Philistine." How endearingly brave that is, coming from a young shepherd. Saul is moved by David too, by his confidence and his quickness. He wants to help him, to give him the tools that led to his own success, his own armor and his sword, and he places his own helmet on David's head. And haven't we all, fathers and mothers both, wanted to help our children with the tools and skills that we have used? It's not so much that we want to see our own methods

perpetuated, but that we want to help our children, we want them not to go naked into the fray. And how many times has it been as with Saul and David, when David says that he cannot use these things? They are not his and he is not used to them. He must do it his own way. It's a struggle always, and Saul, as we see later, cannot really accommodate himself to David's triumph, though he tries.

What a wonderful story this is, for in a few dramatic images, fraught with symbolism and familiarity, we see age old generational struggles played out. We see the youthful challenger, who changes the rules of the game and wins by taking advantage of the very surprise that change brings. We see the pride of the father figure and his affection and his wanting to contribute to the effort. We see him being rejected and his very methods shown to be lacking in utility. And we see his conflicting feelings of pride and humiliation. The story moves me every time I study it.

And the lessons are many, too. We learn from David, of course, that like the basketball girls, we can take advantage of being outsiders. We can use the surprise of our outsider tactics to our advantage as long as we have faith in them, and this, of course, is what David says: "I come to you in the name of the Lord." That

unshakeable confidence makes him strong. I wouldn't, of course, recommend that to a basketball team to be saying, but the sense of it must be theirs as well as it is David's.

And then there is Saul, who, knowing that he cannot win himself, for the spirit of the Lord had left him, after all, he throws his support to David and encourages him and helps him. He goes with the new way of doing things, with the underdog's way. He lets the young man, who becomes a surrogate son, have his way in saving the kingdom. He humbles himself and lets the alternative strategy play out, and he sees that he was right to give way.

But Saul can't do this for long and he ends up warring with David to his own destruction, both spiritually and physically. And so we see that old ways often have to give way to new ways, fathers have to let sons try their wings, and if the sons are successful, they are better off celebrating the sons than trying to reassert their own pride and preeminence.

From the exultant triumph of David to the humiliating despair of Saul – we see in this story an enormous range of human experience. The Bible tells us that God was first with Saul and then with David, but it seems more that he never left either of

them. Rather, they both depart from God in their own personal moments of neglect or rebellion. How familiar these stories seem in our own lives, and how fortunate we are to have them to show us that it has ever been so.