

Sermon for 6 June 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Second Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: 1 Samuel 8:4-20, 11:14-15; Psalm 138 (UM853); 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1;

Mark 3 :20-35

« **Executive decision** »

We're in new territory.

Our Bible readings thrust us into the thick of politics, with the last of the Judges, Samuel, reluctantly accepting the people's demand that he anoint a king over them. The Gospel reading returns to the shortest, probably the oldest, and certainly the most plain-spoken and even rough-talking of the four we have, the Gospel of Mark. Today Mark paints a stark picture of Jesus' beginning ministry: The religious leaders say he's healing people with witchcraft; he snaps back, "That's ridiculous! Satan working against Satan, putting himself out of business; give me a break!" His family thinks he's off his head and comes to take him home ... and as we remember in one of the other Gospels was predicted, "a sword shall pierce your heart" happens to Mary as he answers, "My family is here, anywhere people are obeying God" ... implying "anyone who's listening to me," which Mary and his brothers aren't.

It's not pretty.

It's very much the word for our time.

We Americans have been a republic long enough to know just having a President doesn't solve things. Scripture sounds like one of the Founding Fathers ... I forget which ... who said, "Democracy is the worst form of government ... except for any other."

As far as the Israelites were concerned, if they didn't have a leader like the other nations, the Philistines were going to put an end to their being a special, independent people.

Scripture itself turns such talk on its head. "It's me they're mad at, not you," Yahweh tells Samuel. "Go ahead, anoint them a king." That's not the problem.

In other words, we're dealing with an executive decision here. Samuel balks at democracy ... the people's will; God overrules Samuel; ... and through it all, not what either their old executive, Samuel, wants, and not what his foolish sons want, and not what the majority of the people want ...but the waywardness of public opinion and public behavior are spelled out right there in front of us. It's just sticky business. Karl Barth, the noted Swiss theologian who helped the German church resist during Hitler's time, pointed out quite bluntly that there's no theological principle, no statement of faith, no account of church life in the New Testament that isn't centered around some argument, some controversy.

I've made an executive decision this week. I decided if we're really getting down to serious matters in our joys and concerns, talking about race and such, we'd better start praying a

prayer of confession as part of our regular liturgy. Opinions are right to have. We're not playing at religion; but opinions need help from the Holy Spirit, and that doesn't come without regularly seeking divine help, without confessing we need wisdom, begging for help,. And the resulting grace of God's fundamental eagerness to forgive us all, all sides, and to help us start afresh, giving us sense we never had ... because out of mistakes come insight, out of despair comes hope, out of disagreement comes humility and insight and patient negotiating, and results. That's how the kingdom of heaven works, how it reveals itself.

What are we hearing from the texts today? What is the truth of Jesus' own life, his actions and people's reactions? The Bible puts it so honestly. Samuel's not right. His sons aren't right. Mary and Jesus' brothers and sisters aren't right. Jesus is angry.

We have to make decisions. God help us all! No matter how we're organized, we're going to struggle and suffer... within ourselves, and where two or three are gathered togetherand where we're organized in bigger waysand that's how progress is going to happen. That's where deep wounds heal. That's how our country, and our denomination, and we ourselves, are going to change for the better. Starting from where we are, now ... always.

This church that mainly existed for itself, as churches did when most people went to church ... this church is going to survive in some fashion through service to others. Something will be given, something people need, and we will learn to share it ... not because we're good at taking care of one another, or doing the right thing.. It's more dramatic than that; spookier. I react to the Holy Spirit, argue, run the other direction ... try to sleep it off, beg off because of old age ...and lo and behold, I watch myself overcoming sins I never expected to because I never noticed them until my neighbor confronted me with them In this broken body we call fellowship with Jesus Christ...The Source, the Center of it all, is going to come to our aid, just like the Bible promises.

It's an executive decision by Almighty God, to make a better world, and demonstrate until it finally sticks, that love is the way, the only way, to make a family, to govern a land, to handle a pet or a parent, grow old, and die well, God willing.

Show me this. Live this together. It's not our choice ... It's the will, the grace, the power, of God. It's an executive decision.

Amen.