

Sermon Text for September 19, 2021

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Acts 5:1-11, Judges 16:4-22

“The story of Samson and Delilah”

As we make our way through these Bible stories I think I can safely say that we have seen sides of people in the Bible that we had not seen before and understood them in ways that might provide us with a little more insight into who they really were. When we think of protagonists in the Bible, who are some of your favorite Bible characters? Moses, but he had a few issues as well, you know, the whole anger control management. David who was king and wrote the psalms, that great, but his rape of Bathsheba stopped us a bit in our tracks. There are others, including those in the New Testament with Peter, but his denial of Jesus with Jesus there in the room makes us scratch our head a bit. Paul who wrote the majority of the New Testament is certainly someone we have heard a lot from, but his whole early life of killing Christians doesn't make him a saint.

We have always taken for granted that if you are person who has been chosen by God then almost automatically you are going to be a role model and you will live your life in a way that reflects the God that you have chosen, or even more importantly, that you will live your life in a way that reflects the God who has chosen you. Being chosen by God to carry out His tasks, we have always assumed, means that you are going to be someone who is morally upright.

Yeah, not so much in what we have been reading. Both of our stories today speak of protagonists who really turn into antagonists with their loyalties clearly elsewhere. While they have been chosen to be a part of a community that should be striving after the kingdom of God, instead we see in both of our stories people chosen by God whose loyalties are elsewhere, are not at all on the kingdom after which they ought to be pursuing.

As a result we are forced to ask the question of ourselves in regards to our own loyalties, where do they lie? As individuals, to whom are we the most loyal? As a church, to whom are we the most loyal? Let's read as we ask ourselves that question.

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At each of the churches where I have served I have preached a sermon for stewardship Sunday, which was last week by the way, not this week, entitled give or die. In that sermon I clearly lay out the options that Scripture gives us in regards to giving. We can use the Old Testament example which is tithing which I encouraged last week, or we can use the New

Testament example which we find in our reading this week which is 100%. So what happens in this story which is not only shocking to us, but also a little bit scary. What in the world happened that would necessitate a weeding out of members based upon their giving and the penalty of being weeded out is death?

The purpose of the early church was not only to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to bring more and more people into this kingdom, but it was also to provide a community where people could be safe and where all people were equal in the eyes of God. We read in the verses directly preceding these in 4:32 – and then again in 4:34. This created in the early church a very clear loyalty that each individual would have to the church. In fact, in vs.11 we read for the first time the word church mentioned in the Bible. Each person was unified and loyal to the church as a reflection of the hand of God extended into the world.

Each person in the church was loyal to the church and they showed that not just by showing up on Sunday, but by having everything in common, living together having the same heart and mind. It is a loyalty that goes beyond what any of us have done up to now. This loyalty to the church was, as you can see in this Scripture, non-negotiable. If you had one weak link it could tear down the entire body, the entire family. The persecution of the church in that early time necessitated that everyone not only be on the same page, but that there be a loyalty that was uncompromising.

So, Ananias and Sapphira find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. If they had been born 2,000 years later in Strasburg, they would be fine. The loyalty that we require here at First Presbyterian is nothing like what we saw in the first century. So when we ask the question to whom are we loyal and we respond, as we should, to God, that means something very different today than what it meant in the early church. What is demanded of your loyalty then is very different from what type of loyalty might be expected today.

That's loyalty from a communal perspective specifically related to the church. What kind of loyalty does Samson exhibit in regards to his own personal relationship with God? Samson's story is one where he is considered the last and the worst of the judges. But being a judge it is very clear that he was chosen by God, just like Gideon was chosen, just like Deborah was chosen by God to carry out God's purposes and to lead the people of Israel to a place where they are not only safe but where they would be able to place God first and foremost in their lives.

The story of Samson actually begins in chapter 13. More homework for you. I encourage you to go home and read the story of Samson starting in chapter 13. From the very

beginning of his life, even before he was born, he was chosen by God to be an instrument of God's work. He was chosen to be a Nazarite which meant that he was set apart for the work of God and as a result he was not to cut his hair, drink alcohol, and a series of other legalistic measures, which we read he followed his entire life. But from the time that he was born we see that his loyalty is not on the God who set him apart.

Samson's primary loyalty, ready for this, was sex. That is what drove him, that is what was the most important thing in his life, and I can probably be a bit more diplomatic when I speak about this, but the Bible is really clear where his loyalties lie. Now, he did everything legalistically that he had to do. It would be as if today in the 21st century you had a person who did everything that they understood they had to do in order to be a good Christian. They went to church every Sunday, they tithed, they served on committees, they did everything you would expect from a faithful member of the church.

But that was not Samson's loyalty. Samson has shown here his unwillingness to be set apart as a servant of God's purposes rather than his own. Although Samson is quite aware of his chosen status, his actions have been driven almost exclusively by the pursuits of his own purposes rather than God's purposes.

He tries to marry a Philistine woman in chapter 14 but she betrays him by giving away the answer to his riddle. His reaction to that is one of murder and vengeance. As we pick up this chapter we read the words in vs.4 "after this". After what? Well, this story takes place after his escapades with a prostitute who also betrays him. We then pick up the story of Delilah who very clearly from the very beginning demonstrates where her loyalty lies. She doesn't even try to hide it. In fact, I like Delilah much more than Samson because her loyalty was not to herself but to her country first and foremost.

Her loyalty was clearly not to Samson and she made that known repeatedly. How would someone bind you if they wanted to? What is the secret of your strength? Samson's loyalty is also very clear, it is simply a pursuit of what she had to offer him, that was all that mattered to him. He just wanted to be able to gratify himself with her, that was his primary loyalty and he would do anything to make sure that this primary loyalty would never be taken from him, even if it meant that the presence of the Lord would be taken from him.

And that is exactly what happens, when he finally succumbs and tells Delilah his true secret we read not that his strength left him, but rather that the Lord left him. Delilah knew where Samson's loyalty lay, she knew what drove him, what was the most important thing in his

life, and she took advantage of that. As a result God left Samson because Samson clearly had already left God.

The times in which we are living today require very clear loyalties. God cannot effect deliverance in the presence of unfaithful leaders and an unfaithful people. As a church we participate in a culture that, in essence, teaches self-assertion and institutionalizes idolatry by encouraging people to believe that life consists in the abundance of possession. Reinhold Niebuhr contradicted that belief and stated: It is the mission of the church to transform culture. John Douglas Hall states: Our job is to help God change the world.

To proclaim and embody God's sovereign claim on our lives and the life of the whole world as our ultimately loyalty and allegiance will surely not only transform ourselves but it will also have a transforming effect on the world. It is difficult to be faithful to God's purposes when living in a land that offers compelling, attractive alternatives. Samson's behavior serves as a reminder to us of how easy it is to as a church reflect the ways of prevailing culture instead of transforming it, of how easy it is to become like the world rather than to change the world.

A church largely enculturated is a church that, like Samson, will largely fail to be an agent of God's purpose. Do you remember how the story of Samson and Delilah ends? Samson after he is bound and his eyes are gouged out is brought into the presence of the Philistines after a period of time to celebrate their victory. He is bound between two pillars, he asks for God's presence to return to him. God responds.

This final scene reminds us that in the face of persistent known unfaithfulness, the faithfulness of God is never in doubt. Samson repeatedly forgot God. God never forgot Samson. Our hope lies in the God who will be lovingly faithful to a ludicrously unfaithful people.