

*No Time for Tears*  
A Sermon on 2 Samuel 5 and Mark 6 by the Rev. Philip Major  
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One of the important things I learned from Sudanese members of St. Paul's is the Dinka word that refers to the priest. In their native language the priest is referred to as 'abuna'. Abuna means 'servant'. So the priest is called, with honor and respect, 'servant'. The priest is the servant of the congregation.

This is an idea that comes from Jesus. In Mark, Matthew and Luke, we find passages where Jesus says, "You know that those who rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in authority are like tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant...for the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give up his life as ransom for many."

Leaders must act as servants and have deep humility. Leaders who are like tyrants will fail the people. Leaders who are full of pride and self-confidence will fail in their duties.

These ideas about leadership are central themes of the Old and New Testament. In an article in *The Atlantic* magazine this week, Erica Brown, a scholar of the Hebrew Scriptures and provost of Yeshiva University, made a connection between the failures we are seeing in our leaders and the stories of leaders and leadership described in the Bible. Dr. Brown observes, "The Bible wants us to know that power changes people, that they come to enjoy the weight and clout of office and its many material and emotional benefits."

The Bible is the convoluted, multi-layered story of our faith. Different passages of the Bible contradict one another. But one message comes through fairly consistently, in book after book, in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. The increasing empowerment of leaders often leads to trouble. Absolute power for the king or the governor often leads to grief for the people.

In our scripture passages from 2 Corinthians and 2 Samuel, God's people are struggling with leaders who are failing miserably at the tasks of leadership. We'll devote some attention to the passage from 2 Corinthians during today's Bible Study. For now, let's take a minute to remember the way the people struggled to find a decent, competent king to lead them in the Books of Samuel. *All the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron, and said, "Look, we are your bone and flesh. For some time, while Saul was king over us, it was you who led out Israel and brought it in."*

This is a familiar story. Saul had been a very attractive candidate to be chosen as king; he was tall, handsome, and strong. But after several years of battlefield success, Saul began to fail miserably as a king. Saul could not see that he was losing his ability to make good decisions. He was proud of his accomplishments. He couldn't see that it was time to hand over the reigns to the next person.

Meanwhile, the person who was not actually the king, was acting like a true leader. So eventually, the elders of Israel came to David and made a covenant with him to be their new king. *David led his army to the stronghold of their enemies, the fortress of the Jebusites. David and his army captured the fortress and built a new capital city there, beginning with the outer terraces and proceeding to the center. He named it Jerusalem, and it was called the city of David. And David became greater and greater, for the LORD, the God of hosts, was with him.*

Of course, we know what happens a few chapters further on in the story. David will not always be greater and greater. David will not always walk in the ways of the Lord. David will be one of the best kings of Israel and yet he will abuse his authority and make terrible mistakes. At times, David will fail at his most basic tasks, which are to do the job with competence and humility. David will be arrogant and pay little heed to the opinions and needs of the people. David will fail to know when it's time for him to pass on the reigns to the next person. David will fail to be a servant of the people. "The Bible wants us to know that power changes people, that they come to enjoy the weight and clout of office and its many material and emotional benefits."

We see the other side of the story in our passage from the Gospel of Mark. Jesus is the true leader, because he knows that, as a leader, he will be a servant of the people. He knows that in order to lead and save the people he will give up his life for them. And yet the people of his hometown will have nothing to do with him. They ridicule him and refuse to see that he is a true leader.

In our sacred story we learn that people often do a lousy job of identifying true, faithful, servant-leaders. In our sacred story we learn not to place too much trust in human leaders. We learn that even good leaders will disappoint us at times. We learn that faithful leaders have humility and understand that their work is not really about them. We learn that true leaders are servants of the people they serve.

We reflect on the people of Israel, struggling to find competent, servant leaders at a time when many of us are quite disappointed with many of our political leaders in America. Some of us are disappointed with leaders of our national parties who seem primarily concerned with their own power and accomplishments. Some of us are concerned that the Justices of the Supreme Court are so sure of their own powers and authority that they have given themselves the job of rewriting the United States Constitution.

Yet this is no time for tears. This is not the time to lose heart. This is not the time to give up on the struggle. This is what I have learned, through my entire life, from the people who have surrounded me in the church.

The kinds of struggles we are facing today are one of the reasons we have to be together with other members of God's family. The struggles we are facing today are one of the reasons we have to know and tell more of the stories of our history, including the stories of scripture. We have to be together, and share our stories in order to persevere in the struggle for goodness and respect for all of God's people.

I have been actively engaged in thirteen different congregations in the course of my life. They were diverse in just about every way. Some were in the center of the city, like St. Paul's. One was kind of suburban. A few were in small towns, as in, a town that had no traffic lights. Five of them have been Episcopal. Four of them were UCC, like Plymouth Church, down the street from us. One was Roman Catholic and two were congregations of the Religious Society of Friends, better known as Quakers. As you might guess, most of them were predominantly white, but two of them were predominantly black, and a few were quite diverse in the ethnic backgrounds of the members.

And this is something I have noticed in each of these communities of God's people. Some sort of crisis would arise, like the ones we are facing today, and there would be at least a few of the members of the congregation who would have the faith and wisdom to say, "This is not the time to lose heart." Some sort of tragedy would happen, like the time when I was eight years old, and the Kent State University shootings happened 35 miles from our church. Someone in the congregation would remind us, "This is no time for tears; there's a lot of work to be done around here."

In every single one of these congregations, there was at least one person with the faith to remind us. We don't have time and energy to waste on brooding and sulking; God gave us a job to do, and we're gonna do it. Of course, most of the time the person wouldn't actually say those words. They didn't have to say the words. The person would just look at you and remind you with their whole being that this is not the time to lose heart.

Now here is something important; the person with the deep faith, the person who reminded everyone else to stay the course, was not usually the appointed leader of the congregation. It was not the priest or the pastor. It was usually an older person. It was often an older woman. It was usually someone who in an earlier time would never have been considered to be eligible to be ordained as a leader.

This is why we have to be together as God's people. We have to be together because we need to listen to the words of wisdom and faith brought by others. We have to be together in a place where we recognize one another as fellow members of God's family, because dealing with terrible, corrupt leaders is part of our sacred story. We have to be together in this place where we follow and worship the one we call the Lord of love, because we are not making this journey alone. God walks beside us.