

“Not By Power, Nor By Might”

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Colossians 1:15-20

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

I Samuel 25:26-35

Now then, my lord, as the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, since the Lord has restrained you from blood-guilt and from taking vengeance with your own hand, now let your enemies and those who seek to do evil to my lord be like Nabal. And now let this present that your servant has brought to my lord be given to the young men who follow my lord. Please forgive the trespass of your servant; for the Lord will certainly make my lord a sure house, because my lord is fighting the battles of the Lord; and evil shall not be found in you as long as you live. If anyone should rise up to pursue you and to seek your life, the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living under the care of the Lord your God; but the lives of your enemies he shall sling out as from the hollow of a sling. When the Lord has done to my lord according to all the good that he has spoken concerning you, and has appointed you prince over Israel, my lord shall have no cause of grief, or pangs of conscience, for having shed blood without cause or for having saved himself. And when the Lord has dealt well with my lord, then remember your servant.'

David said to Abigail, 'Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who sent you to meet me today! Blessed be your good sense, and blessed be you, who have kept me today from blood-guilt and from avenging myself by my own hand! For as surely as the Lord the God of Israel lives, who has restrained me from hurting you, unless you had hurried and come to meet me, truly by morning there would not have been left to Nabal as much as one male.' Then David received from her hand what she had brought him; he said to her, 'Go up to your house in peace; see, I have heeded your voice, and I have granted your petition.'

The title of today's message is, Not by Power, Nor by Might. This text is a difficult text for me. And it's a long story. And I pulled a portion of it out for this sermon today. But as I was dealing with it, I really thought it was a timely text for today. I want to start this with reading just a portion of a story that came out this morning on CBS Good Morning. And it says, "Will politics be the death of civility? Just how rude has today's life become? And just how much is the tone of our politics to blame?" And this is a long article, but it talks a little bit about-- it asks the question of, "Has our ideological politics pushed us into corners? Does it seem as if insults and name calling have taken the place of civil dialogue, that incivility has gone viral?" And if you read the story completely, it doesn't just deal with today, but it talks about the role of civility versus incivility and the life of this country. And I thought it was very suiting for this message today because we're going to look closely at the interaction between three persons in this story, Nabal, Abigail, and David.

David is not yet king. He is on the run from Saul. In some places, he has declared himself king, but Saul is still on the throne. Abigail, when you read the story-- the text in the book, describes her as someone who's intelligent and beautiful. And then it talks a little bit about Nabal. And it's a wordplay on his name. His name means churlish, bullish, someone who's contemptible. And so we have David who's on the run and by

this time he's camping in different pastures. Some text say he has 400 men. Other texts say he has about 600 men roaming around the countryside with him. And by the time we get to this text, he has camped in the pasture of Nabal. And what he and his men do are, they offer protection to the shepherds in the field. Nabal has about 3,000 sheep in his pasture. And David has sent some of his men to Nabal and asked if he would provide them some sheep for food, provide some provisions for his men, especially since they have provided protection for them. And Nabal's response was, "Who is David? And why should I give up my bread to someone whom I don't know?" And in the background are the servants of Nabal who hear this response. They know who David is. They know how many men are following David. And in the background, they run to Abigail and say, "Let me tell you what's going on," because they know that something bad is about to happen. And so when the men go back and report to David the response to this request, David is quick to anger and his response is, "Get your swords and we're going to ride out. And we're going to take care of this problem today."

The problem with David is that he is about to exact revenge only because he is insulted. And I find several things about this passage that are disturbing to me. One is, David is really being self-righteous and egotistical. He is angry because Nabal acted a fool. But what do you expect from someone whose name is folly? He acts the way he is. So what if David has been embarrassed? So what if his men have witnessed him being ridiculed? It's like when I was younger and I would take a complaint to my mother and she would say, "Is it going to kill you? Did it hurt you? Are you hurt?" And she would go through a list of things and the answer would always be, "No." And then she would say, "You're okay then. Move on." In the end, is an insult enough to initiate a cycle of revenge that will only conclude with the death of countless, innocent people? My second problem with this text is that David has a band of warriors. Dependent upon which scholar you talk to, some people will say it's just men who have taken up with him, who believe in him, who are following him until he becomes king. Other scholars will say that these are warriors, mercenaries, soldiers. And so David mounts up a certain number of warriors to go against a household of servants and families. He possesses more power with his band of warriors. And so there's an imbalance between what he is proposing to do against the household that he's going against.

Due to his strength in numbers, he is called to be the one who takes the higher road and thus limit his response to others. He is the one who has to consider his actions thoroughly before going to war or to engage Nabal in a way that the conflict can be resolved nonviolently. We already know that he did not do this. He is prepared to go to war. Luke 12:48 says, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded. And from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked." Just because someone has power does not give them the right to abuse that power. And we as people do this so easily. My third problem with David is around the fact that because he is the most powerful person in this story, he would be out of line to strike first and especially since he's striking for such a trivial reason. If you were to read this story, you would find out that at Nabal's house, he has no idea that this threat is coming his way. He is not assembling a war party to kind of head off David. In fact, if you go down towards the end of the story when Abigail goes back home to talk to him about what has happened, he's at home, with his friends, having a party, and drinking. He has no clue of what he has initiated with his trivial insult to David. And so in this text what we have is a view of what actually happens as an act of intervention. His wife, Abigail, once the servants come to her and say, "Let me tell you what happened. And let me tell you who was involved," I would have imagined that she could see the fear in them.

And so Abigail goes on a mission of intervention and she is the one who stops David on the mountain. She is the one who falls at his feet. And she is the one who requests a hearing from him. And as this text unfolds, we begin to see the full extent of her wisdom. Abigail not only comes before David with presents and words of wisdom, but she comes with a veiled suggestion that is designed to help David remember who he is and who has called him to be king. Although at this time David is living like a bandit, he is roaming from city to city, Saul is on his tail chasing him. He really is living off of what he gets from strangers. Maybe all of this running around and trying to stay safe made him forget his destiny. It's hard when you're

trying to figure out how to stay safe every day. David seems to have forgotten that God has promised good for him and that God would fulfill that promise even though the present-day reality didn't display that. God has promised David that he would be king and that he would be successful. But looking at David right now, he seems a bit lost. Maybe that's why he was so quick to anger. When there's pressure on you all the time, it's hard to hold your own peace. It's hard to keep your tongue in check. And I'm speaking about myself right now [laughter]. Sometimes I have to remember-- I'll tell people, "I'm tired right now. You might not get a good response from me." And so maybe that's where the anger is coming from, is his own internal pressure of having to feed these men and keep them safe.

And so Abigail comes along and she reminds him of his future. She reminds him of this promise that God has made. But she also reminds him that if he kills Nabal, if he acts irrationally and without consideration, that there would be long-term consequences. David is reminded through her words that he is not completely in charge of his destiny. Everything does not depend upon him solely, that he has been called and selected by God. And we learn at the end that she's successful. It's like her words made him pause. Sometimes we have to pause and remember who we are, and whose we are, and who has called us into being. Because she not only saves David, stops him from taking revenge, but she saves her household, an act of revenge which would have entailed the taking of innocent lives. She saved him from an act of retaliation, which would've had negative consequences for him in the long run. She saved him from an act, which would have displeased God, who had already given David and the other Israelites clear instruction about taking the lives of innocent people. Now I won't let Nabal off. We all know he committed a serious mistake in offending David. And I can't let him off because then I would be letting myself off when I make a mistake by insulting and offending others. When I was younger, I learned the hard way that sometimes I can be insulting, that I can say something and not even know that I am insulting someone else. But if I would read their body language or their facial expressions I would be able to tell that I'm saying something that's just kind of off point.

Sometimes we say things to each other and walk away wishing we could take our words back. Sometimes we do things to others and it's not until we get home and settle down and realize that we have offended someone. Sometimes we omit telling the truth when it is most desperately needed by the person we are talking to. And sometimes we even react our own selves with anger, when if we could just calm ourselves and be peaceful, we could do what needed to be done. Sometimes in the face of disrespectful communications with others, we are silent and we make excuses for people's bad behavior. And yet, we are all part of the body of Christ, called to be unified and forgiving, called to remind each other when someone has stepped out of bounds. Sometimes it's not what we do, it's what we witness and allow to happen without speaking to it. God has given us clear instructions on many areas of our lives, not all. For example, as a child, I learned the Ten Commandments. And even though I could not quote them to you probably now, there are some things about the Ten Commandments that are integrated into my being about what it means to be a person of peace, someone who loves, someone who honors, someone who respects others. I picked this text because, in this era of incivility, it is a reminder for us that what we have, what we believe, is so needed right now. That as the people of God, we are called to be a word of peace, not war. That as the people of God, we are called to be a word of truth, not lies. That as the people of God, we are called to be wise and reconciling, unified. We're called to be a word that gives life, not take it away. We are called to be a word of justice, not oppression.

Jesus, as a man, walked this Earth as we do. And he revealed to us through his words and action, what it is like to not only hold ourselves accountable but to hold others accountable. As we look at today's text, I can understand Nabal and I think I witness this type of behavior every day now. The not holding oneself in check, the lack of filters, the inability to remember that the person beside us counts just as much as I myself count, the blatant way in which we are taking off-- we're unplugging from having a moral compass. It can be too much, but it can never be too much for the people of God. We have to figure out how to be the word of peace, how to be the word of reconciliation, how to be love in this country at this time, this day, this

moment. Amen. Let us pray.

Dear God, you have given us the ability to be the beacon of light in the world and so we ask, Oh, Lord, that as we sit in this place today, that you may continue to remind us that all that we need in order to be love, to be peace, to be grace, to be merciful, and compassionate, and to demonstrate and embody empathy that you have provided, you will provide. And so we ask, Oh, Lord, that you give us the courage to remind this world, this nation, that there is indeed another way to be. Give us the strength to counter all of the ways that are not of you. You have placed this country on a different path many times in the past. And we're not happy with the path that it seems like we're about to go down. And so help us to understand individually and collectively what the work it is that we are called to do, how it is we are called to be. And give us the courage to do and be the word in the world. Amen.