

Sermon for Sunday, October 12, 2025

1 Samuel 3:1-21

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

Many years ago I had a conversation with a pastor who was a really good preacher. I asked him how he decided what theme to preach on each week. He responded with, "I preach on what I need to hear...."

Today's Scripture reading from 1 Samuel has two parts: the "feel good" first part and the "delivery of a difficult message" second part. It's really tempting to focus on the feel good first part and ignore or gloss over the second part. But that's not what I need to hear this week. This text has been causing me distress all week and that is because I have found myself consistently focusing on Eli and his failings. There are challenging words to Eli embedded in this text; by extension they speak to us as well. What is it that I need to hear?

Let's begin with the backstory about Eli and his two sons because it will help you to grasp the situation more readily. In chapter 2, verses 12-17 and later in verses 22-36 it is told that Eli's two sons were "scoundrels." They were purposefully taking portions of sacrifices being offered by everyday Israelites: basically skimming from the offering plate. They were also being sexually promiscuous in public. Regular Israelites knew about the disrespect the sons were demonstrating but had little power to do anything about their behavior. Father and priest Eli did have the power and the responsibility. He knew what his sons were doing and attempted to correct them but they wouldn't listen to him. A little later in the early narrative there was "a man of God" who came to Eli and told him that unless he did something to stop his sons from their abuse of power he and his family would be destroyed. Still Eli did nothing. He allowed his sons to continue with their abusive behavior.

This story troubles me because it speaks of Eli's lack of action. To be clear he DID tell his sons to stop being such scoundrels. They didn't stop. And from the larger story it appears that he only corrected his sons verbally once. It also appears that he did nothing else; he didn't ban them from the temple; didn't post guards to stop their indiscretions in and near the temple. Most importantly he didn't take action to defend God's honor. And that

appears to be the crucial point: Eli was an ordained priest dedicated to guiding the Israelites in the proper worship of God and he wasn't maintaining God's honor.

We are told that Eli is an aged man. His eyesight has failed. (and maybe the text says that because his eyesight has failed in more ways than one.) He acts in a surprisingly passive manner toward the abuse perpetrated by his sons. When Samuel tells him God's message he still remains passive. Even this dire prophecy out of the mouth of Samuel does not stir Eli to action. Kinda makes you wonder what's going on with him physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

Returning to my opening premise: "What do I (we) need to hear in this place and time?" It seems to me that this text is calling us: especially those of us who are grandparents and great-grandparents to speak and perhaps to action. As faithful followers of Jesus we are being warned that it is necessary for us to use our words to sustain God's (Jesus') honor. In light of this message let's read a few of Jesus' teachings so that we are reminded of what Jesus considers action that honors God's name. Teachings like:

Matthew 5:39-45 from the sermon on the mount: But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

Later in Matthew 22:36-39 a legal scholar asks, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" (You could phrase his question like this, "Teacher how do I honor God?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

In Matthew 25:31-40 Jesus teaches, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and

he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' Sometimes it's our words and sometimes it's our actions that honor God and God's name.

So what did I need to hear from today's Scripture reading? Three points:

I needed to be reminded that I have a responsibility to speak when God puts it on my heart. I don't think I'm alone in that charge; I think each of us is called to speak and remind others of Jesus' teachings.

I needed to be reminded that Eli may have failed in one aspect of his life: the correcting of his sons; but he didn't fail in another aspect: the mentoring of Samuel to be a faithful priest of God most high. The end of today's reading says that all of Israel knew that Samuel was a trustworthy prophet of the Lord. The Lord continued to reveal himself to Samuel for many years. There is success embedded in this story and Eli was a part of that success.

I needed to hear the teachings of Jesus and be reminded of the love and grace that should fill our earthly behavior. This is what he instructs us to do; how he instructs us to live.

I needed to be reminded of a teaching from the author of the first letter of John. 1 John 4:7-11 7 Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent

his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

That is our task my friends: to act with love toward one another. To continue to mentor and teach the next generations knowing that there will be both failures and successes. To fight the good fight of faith until the end; trusting in the promises of our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Amen.