

Faith Mennonite Church
Things That Make for Peace
July 13, 2008

Third Party Intervention
I Samuel 25

For three Sundays running now, we've had stories that involve food as a major element of a peacemaking story. First there was Isaac, struggling over wells, who served his adversaries a meal when they were finally ready to seal a peace pact. Then last week there was Elisha who led his temporarily blind enemies into the hands of their foes, only to insist that they be served a feast and released rather than have their eyes permanently punched out. And today food saves the day once again as Abigail, beautiful, clever woman that she is, averts a bloody wrangle between her foolish husband and David's clandestine warriors who are hungry not just for food but also revenge for an affront to their leader.

What is unique about today's story is that it is dealing with conflict at two levels – the domestic household and the nation-state. On the domestic level, one can imagine that life with this brutish, macho man was probably not too pleasant for Abigail. On the national level, the context within which today's story occurs, is that Israel is not only fending off the Philistines but is engaged in a nasty succession struggle between King Saul and the anointed-but-not-yet-coroneted David. David is on the hunt for food precisely because he and his band of soldiers are living on the run, trying to avoid and outsmart Saul and his army.

Samuel, who's death is announced at the beginning of today's story plays an important role in this succession process. And it's much more than a succession process from one king to the next. It's actually the end of a longer transition from one form of governance to another: from judgeship to kingship. In a longer story that stretches from the book of Judges into 1 Samuel we read of Israel's struggle to find an appropriate form of civil leadership. It is a story of nation-building, the complex process that dogs countries to this day.

For an extended period of time after Israel became a settled nation, it was led by judges. One problem, however with judgeship was that there was no system of succession. When one judge died, another didn't automatically take his or her place. As long as things were going well, Israel evidently got along without a leader. Only when sin, conflict or violence broke out, would God call forth a new judge. So, no sin, no leader.

As life became increasingly complex and Israel was often threatened by neighbors, one can understand the popular desire for a form of government that would be more predictable—and recognizable to the neighbors. But God had always warned about the risks of kingship: centralization of power, conscription and taxation, the desire to build alliances with other nations which might erode their identity and loyalty to Yahweh. But with time, God conceded to Israel's desire for kingship, and God chose the first two kings, Saul and David, in the same way that God previously chose the judges.

The transition from judgeship to kingship was not easy or quick. Samuel, the last of the judges, played an important role throughout most of Saul's kingship. And the succession from Saul to David was anything but smooth. Like many a dictator that has held tightly and madly to power, Saul refused to relinquish his throne even after God withdrew God's blessing and popular support had shifted away from Saul to David.

So one lesson of the larger story is that leadership transitions and the institutionalization of healthy forms of government take a long, *very long* time. Even in this story, in which God plays a leading role, the struggle between Saul and David lasted far beyond the time when God proclaimed Saul's kingship finished and Samuel had anointed young David as the next king. But Samuel didn't

become impatient with God and throw in the towel: he played an important role as a third-party, mediating among God, the people and the dueling kings. And he didn't get to see a neat resolution before he died.

Within this larger narrative of the struggle of succession, we have today's episode: David and his covert band are hungry. They're hiding out and on the move, avoiding King Saul who has a death warrant out for David. Saul's kingship has effectively ended, but he's still trying to hang on to power. David's men have camped out with sheep herders, offering them protection when they've been in contested areas, so when David gets close to the town where the sheep-owner Nabal, a rich but foolish man, is sheering sheep, he decides to ask for a return favor—a bit of food for his comrades. Nabal, however isn't impressed by David. Maybe he's jealous. Maybe he's just a hard-headed brute. At any rate, he doesn't feel beholden to David and says no to the request.

David is incensed. His men are hungry. They've provided protection that's going unacknowledged. With Saul's army already weighing heavily on him, a foolish brute like Nabal became the straw that breaks the camel's back. David allowed the very human revenge instinct to take over and he set out to punish Nabal for his refusal. David wasn't following the old "eye for an eye" instruction of commensurate justice. He vowed to wipe the guy out.

Even without cell phones and email, word spreads fast that David is on a rampage and Nabal is the target. Nabal's wife Abigail decides to take matters into her hands after one of Nabal's shepherds informs her that David did in fact provide protection. So, without a word to her husband, she loads up a substantial amount of food and goes with it to deliver a peace message to David. She asks forgiveness for her brute of a husband, praises David and predicts his future success, offers food, *and* asks to be remembered when he finally comes out on top. David accepts her peace plan, and for a day, bloodshed is averted.

But before we cheer too loudly for Abigail we need to note that there is a casualty in the story. In the succeeding verses we learn that Abigail reports to Nabal what she has done and he becomes so enraged that he evidently causes a stroke or heart attack. Within days he is dead. As soon as news gets back to David, he sends a proposal of marriage and Abigail receives a positive answer to her request that he remember her. However, it is fair to ask: was this all a divine recompense for her wise action or was she in fact plotting an escape from an unsavory marriage? Was she concerned that David would shed the blood of her husband and his workers or did she fear that her husband might, in fact, get the best of David? While it would appear at first blush that this strong, self-confident woman would be a perfect wife for a king, we learn that Abigail becomes one of *six* wives whom David takes, not because polygamy is the order of the day in Israel, but because it bolsters his power as king. Abigail never enters the story again as a major character.

One of the wonderful things about the Bible and of these ancient stories is precisely the complexity, the contradictions and the unanswered questions. These are not "and they lived happier-ever-after" fairy tales, but stories of human pathos and struggle. They mirror our own world as we watch the likes of Robert Mugabe cling to power in Zimbabwe, like King Saul. We know about conflictive marriages and we know the risky combination of political power and sexual exploitation. The stories encourage us to keep working for peace in the world and in our homes, even if the struggle is long and some of our most trusted companions are flawed and occasionally fail us. Like Isaac, Elisha, Samuel and Abigail, we need to take risks, extending ourselves and offering the food of peace to those around us.

I'd like close with a story that happened very recently, of someone who wisely took this challenge and the risk. The setting was Ely and the "food" was a couple glasses of scotch and cigars.

Neil Okerlund, who gave me permission to share this story, was up in Ely several weeks ago, spending time with his father-in-law as he has done regularly since marrying Debbie 22 years ago. Their relationship was not always close. In fact, Neil's father-in-law, Dwight, could not initially accept the idea of his daughter marrying a man 12 years her senior who was recently divorced with two children. Not long after the wedding the inevitable, ugly "face-off" happened and he became separated from his daughter. The price was too great, however, for both Neil and Dwight and they decided to put the past behind them and start over. Twenty-two years later, father- and son-in-law are very dear friends. They miss each other when their time apart stretches into months.

This visit, however, had started out stressfully. Big changes were in store for Dwight. For years his wife maintained a counseling practice in Duluth, spending stretches of time living and attending to her clients there while he lived and maintained their home in Ely. She was now in the process of ending her practice and returning home permanently. She was asserting herself and taking more ownership. Neil arrived for his annual week-long retreat with his father-in-law in the midst of their tensions. Little spats continually flared and Dwight was not showing signs of letting go of "his" space and letting his wife in.

Two days into their retreat Neil and his father-in-law took their familiar seats on the back porch overlooking Garden Lake, smoking cigars and sipping scotch, as they routinely ended their days together. Neil sensed that it was time for him to speak to what had been happening. He told Dwight, "I'm about to say something difficult, and I'm confident you will take it in and consider it. It's time to let go. Stop the fighting. Open yourself and let her in. Apologize and even grovel if you must. Welcome her and give her the space she needs to settle into her new life with you."

Dwight drew deeply on his cigar, nodded and they sat silently for some time.

The next morning Dwight and his wife Alice left for a boat ride and Neil had the sense to busy himself around the house. After a time they returned, arm in arm, with renewed affection for each other. The remainder of the week felt like a celebration of their new life together. They stood arm in arm on the porch as Neil said goodbye to them and left.

Two days later, Alice suffered a massive stroke while sitting next to Dwight. She never recovered. When he called Neil with the news, Dwight sobbed deeply and thanked Neil for what he had done to bring Alice and him back together.

Please join me in a moment of silent reflection, holding up the regions of international strife that concern you, or reflecting on your own life and relationships, considering where God might be calling you to intervene on behalf of reconciliation and restoration.

Joetta Schlabach