

Faith Mennonite Church  
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Seek Peace & Pursue It  
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## Breaking the cycle of violence

*1 Samuel 25:1-35*

Old Testament stories are never as simple as they may sound upon first reading. Our story today is part of the larger story of David's rise to the throne of Israel. After Israel entered the Promised Land and became self-governing, they were initially led by judges or seers, holy men (and one woman, Deborah) who would guide them based on messages from God. But as time passed the people began to call for a king. They wanted the protection of an army. They wanted a leadership system on par with their neighbors. They begged and whined long enough that God finally said OK and directed Samuel, considered the last judge and the first prophet, to anoint a man named Saul as king.

Saul's first response when he was anointed was to fall into a prophetic frenzy and it seemed that God's spirit was upon him and would guide him. Over time, however, *frenzy* became the operative word. Frenzy that led to erratic behavior and to God's disapproval. As we read the stories of Saul today we sympathize with a person who likely suffered from mental illness.

By the time of today's story, God had withdrawn support from Saul and had ordered Samuel to anoint a successor, the young David. He did so in a quiet ceremony that Saul was not aware of. For a time Saul and David had a peaceful relationship; David was Saul's armor-bearer and his musician. David's harp music was soothing to Saul when he was tormented by what we imagine was depression or paranoia. But with time Saul grew jealous and dissatisfied with David, both because David proved himself a popular warrior and because Saul's son Jonathan seemingly fell in love with David.

David was forced into clandestine living. In modern parlance we'd call him a guerrilla leader. He attracted a group of several hundred followers, people who are described in 1 Samuel 22 as "in distress," ... "in debt, and ... discontented"—the same people who are attracted to insurgent movements today. They took it upon themselves to provide security to rural villages and sheep herders, protecting them from bandits and from wild animals. And they did their best to stay clear of Saul's forces. In return, they looked to the local population that they "protected" for food.

This is the setting for today's story. David hears that a certain land-owner Nabal is sheering sheep. One gathers from the story that sheep shearing is a festive occasion, complete with butchering and feasting. David thinks this is a good time to call in a favor: he has provided protection to Nabal's shepherds, in return he hopes for a gift of food for his band. So he sends a few men to make the request, but to their dismay Nabal totally rebuffs them, suggesting that he hasn't even heard of David, or if he has, he's not impressed. In effect, he replies with an insult.

David reacts immediately, ready to answer insult with injury, grave injury. He arms his men and himself and sets off to take revenge. His hunger for food turns to hunger for blood, his response clearly out of proportion to the insult.

One of Nabal's workers anticipates (or hears through the grapevine about) David's reaction and hurries to tell Nabal's wife Abigail about her husband's poor behavior and the terror it is unleashing. She quickly calculates that she will have an easier time talking David down than trying to reason with her husband. So she loaded up a huge feast, enough food for hundreds—without telling her husband—and sets off to meet the marauders. And it works. David listens as Abigail asks forgiveness for her brute husband's actions and as she directs him away from his intended revenge. She saves the people whom David would have killed *and* she saves David from incurring guilt for such an action.

This is the end of the story we read this morning, but it's not the complete story. If we keep reading, we find that when Abigail returns and tells Nabal what she did, he explodes with such anger that it kills him. And when David hears of Nabal's death he takes Abigail as a wife. All of a sudden the whole story feels more complex, and the motives of the various characters mixed at best. There's no clear hero; everyone is tainted.

Perhaps that is an important message of this story. As much as we long for heroes, for inscrutable leaders and models, even when it comes to peacemaking we know all too well that we're all tainted, we all "have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," as Paul wrote to the Romans (3:23).

While this story may not provide untainted heroes for peace, it does give some clues about the roots and character of at least one kind of violence and it provides an example of how to break the cycle of violence.

First the roots and character of violence. Very often conflict and violence are related to resources, contested resources. As I said earlier, David's clandestine band was made of people who lacked resources, people who felt destitute and marginalized. Sometimes this occurs because of hard luck or poor choices people have made. But more often there are social and structural causes for inequalities in society. This past Wednesday evening, Gerald and I went to a presentation at the MN Historical Society about the roots of the 1862 U.S. Dakota War. Mary Lethert Wingerd, an associate professor of history at St. Cloud State University, told the wrenching story of successive treaties during the first half of the 19th century that removed the Dakota peoples from the lands they and their ancestors had inhabited for centuries. Pushed onto limited, marginal land and nearly starving because fires on the plains had decimated the buffalo population, young Dakota warriors struck out at settlers who had moved into the land now sold by land speculators. Professor Wingerd did not defend or excuse the actions of the young warriors but described why they felt so desperate.

When resources are contested and one person or group controls more than their fair share another factor comes into play: entitlement. A sense of entitlement trumps any sense of equity or compassion. Entitlement tends to blind a person to the recognition that few, if any, people amass wealth and resources without some aid from others. Just this week we heard a presidential candidate deny the fact that that his wealth had its beginning in the privilege he enjoyed as the son of a successful business man and politician, or that private enterprises, like the ones he has owned, benefit from the infrastructure that the public sector has built, thanks to the tax contributions of everyone.

In our story today, Nabal especially, but David too, exhibit that sense of entitlement. Nabal felt no need to share or to acknowledge the protective help that David's band had offered his shepherds. David felt that he was entitled to anything he asked for—entitled to payment for a service that he had offered voluntarily. Both men were willing to risk and take the lives of others, perhaps even lose all that they had, to protect that sense of entitlement.

How many places do we see this playing out today? The Assad regime in Syria...mercenary armies in Eastern Congo and the superpowers that are quietly extracting resources there....the United States defense forces in wars to defend access to oil and other resources...dictators unwilling to relinquish power even as their citizens are decimated and infrastructure is demolished...politicians who take intransigent positions, refusing to compromise for a greater good. Entitlement is alive and well in our world.

How do we stop the cycle of violence that entitlement engenders? If we take today's story at face value there seem to be two immediate answers in the action of Abigail: One is to work with the person or party who seems most reasonable. She seemed to understand that trying to change her husband's mind would be futile, for his very name described him as a fool. At the same time, she guessed that David could be talked down if his original request was granted; more than anything he and his group were hungry and they wanted food. She met that need and defused his retaliatory plans.

Leaders, communities, and governments perpetuate cycles of violence when they deny the basic needs and rights of some of their members and when they simply seek a path of punishment and retribution for those who act out of desperation or rise in rebellion. I am thankful for the work of Mennonite Central Committee, Christian and Muslim Peacemaker Teams, and other organizations that work creatively to meet human need. Just as Abigail refused to let her husband define who her enemy was, these organizations have worked in places labeled "enemy territory" by our government.

Peacemaking is no simple task. It requires risk and humility. It asks us to reconsider our own sense of entitlement and to look beneath the crime statistics in our city to understand who are the ones "in distress," ... "in debt, and ... discontented" to whom God may want to draw us?