



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"The Diplomat" - Grit and Grace Sermon Series

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Big Themes

This summer we're preaching a series of sermons on some of the great women of the Bible. We've called the series Grit and Grace and we've met some remarkable people already. One of the things I've been learning from these studies is what it looks like to be a great leader.

I've got a number of points I'd like to make this morning but the most exciting thing about what we're doing here today is that God may have some different points He'd like to try and make with you and with me. He's here this morning and is fully capable of impressing on you and me the things He wants us to learn from this passage and then challenge us to apply what we learn to our lives. So, let's listen for His Spirit speaking to us this morning.

Today's text is going to remind us that great leaders can make big mistakes. Here's your hot Bible reading tip of the day. It may be obvious to you but I want to remind us that people in the Bible, even the great heroes, even ones like David, who is described as a person "after God's own heart," can make big mistakes.

When you and I sit down to read the Bible, we need to bring our God-informed, Scripture

guided discernment to what we read. We need to ask ourselves, "Is what I'm reading an example I should follow or is it a cautionary tale, a story that shows me something I should avoid doing?" When it comes to David he is going to be both an example of what we should not do as well as an example of what it looks like to be a truly great leader. The woman we meet in this story, a person by the name of Abigail, is going to take us to her leadership academy. What she does in this story is incredibly impressive and courageous. We can learn from her.

This passage of Scripture is going to again remind us that we need to engage the world around us with our eyes wide open to the complex realities of peoples lives. Like life itself, these stories are super complex and the characters in these stories are nuanced. This is not a story filled with cartoon superheroes. It's not easy to divide the people in these stories into good guys and bad guys.

The story we're going to look at today is going to illustrate that. When we read 1 Samuel 25 in the light of the previous chapter we're going to see that David, the man after God's own heart, is capable of both great compassion and great foolishness.

This story is about a totally unnecessary conflict that almost erupts into a catastrophe. It was a conflict that was created by a man by the name of Nabal with the help of David, the young man who is on his way to becoming the king of Israel. Neither of these men were willing to calm down, back down and chose a path of peace, at least not on their own.

This story is going to challenge us to see that a truly great leader is one who recognizes that pride and power, especially wounded pride coupled with power, is a dangerous cocktail that can blind us to God's pathway of peacemaking. If we find ourselves in a situation where our pride is wounded, we can be blind to the options we have right in front of us to avoid conflict.

We're also going to see that a great leader is a person who is willing to admit their mistakes.

A leader's willingness to acknowledge when they are wrong, as David will in this story, is extremely important. This story demonstrates that God can continue to shape anyone's character. God has not given up on us even when we are heading down a dangerous path.

The person who makes all of these amazing leadership lessons possible is a remarkable woman by the name of Abigail. David's willingness to follow Abigail's lead is another piece of evidence that David is capable of being a strong, wise leader. Great leaders are also great followers.

The most important lesson we'll learn from this passage is that a great leader is one who is willing to be a maker of peace. Abigail is a gifted diplomat. Being a peacemaker is at least as courageous as charging into battle with your sword drawn. Many of us don't really believe that. But diplomacy, peace-making requires incredible courage. Abigail is the strongest leader in this situation because she is the wisest, most selfless character in the story. From a human perspective, she is the hero who steps in and prevents David from pursuing a morally bankrupt plan. Okay. Let's jump into this incredible story.

In the first three verses of 1 Samuel 25, we're going to meet the main characters in the story. First, Samuel. He was the last judge in Israel's history. Last week, Chris Pan told us about Deborah, one of the judges of Israel. We're also going to meet David, the young man who is on his way to becoming the second King of Israel. And we're going to meet an unhappily married couple, Nabal and Abigail. I'm going to have David Suchet read a good chunk of this story and then we're going to have a chat about it.

1 Samuel 25:1-35

Now Samuel died, and all Israel assembled and mourned for him; and they buried him at his home in Ramah. Then David moved down into the

Desert of Paran. 2 A certain man in Maon, who had property there at Carmel, was very wealthy. He had a thousand goats and three thousand sheep, which he was shearing in Carmel. 3 His name was Nabal and his wife's name was Abigail. She was an intelligent and beautiful woman, but her husband was surly and mean in his dealings—he was a Calebite.

4 While David was in the wilderness, he heard that Nabal was shearing sheep. 5 So he sent ten young men and said to them, "Go up to Nabal at Carmel and greet him in my name. 6 Say to him: 'Long life to you! Good health to you and your household! And good health to all that is yours!' 7 "Now I hear that it is sheep-shearing time. When your shepherds were with us, we did not mistreat them, and the whole time they were at Carmel nothing of theirs was missing. 8 Ask your own servants and they will tell you. Therefore be favorable toward my men, since we come at a festive time. Please give your servants and your son David whatever you can find for them."

9 When David's men arrived, they gave Nabal this message in David's name. Then they waited. 10 Nabal answered David's servants, "Who is this David? Who is this son of Jesse? Many servants are breaking away from their masters these days. 11 Why should I take my bread and water, and the meat I have slaughtered for my shearers, and give it to men coming from who knows where?" 12 David's men turned around and went back. When they arrived, they reported every word. 13 David said to his men, "Each of you strap on your sword!" So they did, and David strapped his on as well. About four hundred men went up with

David, while two hundred stayed with the supplies.

14 One of the servants told Abigail, Nabal's wife, "David sent messengers from the wilderness to give our master his greetings, but he hurled insults at them. 15 Yet these men were very good to us. They did not mistreat us, and the whole time we were out in the fields near them nothing was missing. 16 Night and day they were a wall around us the whole time we were herding our sheep near them. 17 Now think it over and see what you can do, because disaster is hanging over our master and his whole household. He is such a wicked man that no one can talk to him."

18 Abigail acted quickly. She took two hundred loaves of bread, two skins of wine, five dressed sheep, five seahs of roasted grain, a hundred cakes of pressed figs, and loaded them on donkeys. 19 Then she told her servants, "Go on ahead; I'll follow you." But she did not tell her husband Nabal. 20 As she came riding her donkey into a mountain ravine, there were David and his men descending toward her, and she met them. 21 David had just said, "It's been useless—all my watching over this fellow's property in the wilderness so that nothing of his was missing. He has paid me back evil for good. 22 May God deal with David, a be it ever so severely, if by morning I leave alive one male of all who belong to him!" 23 When Abigail saw David, she quickly got off her donkey and bowed down before David with her face to the ground. 24 She fell at his feet and said: "Pardon your servant, my lord, and let me speak to you; hear what your servant has to say.

25 Please pay no attention, my lord, to that wicked man Nabal. He is just like his name—his name means Fool, and folly goes with him. And as for me, your servant, I did not see the men my lord sent. 26 And now, my lord, as surely as the LORD your God lives and as you live, since the LORD has kept you from bloodshed and from avenging yourself with your own hands, may your enemies and all who are intent on harming my lord be like Nabal. 27 And let this gift, which your servant has brought to my lord, be given to the men who follow you. 28 “Please forgive your servant’s presumption. The LORD your God will certainly make a lasting dynasty for my lord, because you fight the LORD’s battles, and no wrongdoing will be found in you as long as you live.

29 Even though someone is pursuing you to take your life, the life of my lord will be bound securely in the bundle of the living by the LORD your God, but the lives of your enemies he will hurl away as from the pocket of a sling. 30 When the LORD has fulfilled for my lord every good thing he promised concerning him and has appointed him ruler over Israel, 31 my lord will not have on his conscience the staggering burden of needless bloodshed or of having avenged himself. And when the LORD your God has brought my lord success, remember your servant.”

32 David said to Abigail, “Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, who has sent you today to meet me. 33 May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands. 34 Otherwise, as surely as the LORD, the God of Israel,

lives, who has kept me from harming you, if you had not come quickly to meet me, not one male belonging to Nabal would have been left alive by daybreak.” 35 Then David accepted from her hand what she had brought him and said, “Go home in peace. I have heard your words and granted your request.”

The Loss of a Wise Mentor

So, what in the world is going on here. I’ve got a few suggestions. The death of Samuel the prophet brought to close the era of the Judges in Israel. The impact of Samuel’s death on David must have been tremendous. David had lost a personal champion, and a wise counselor and guide. David lost a man in his life who had seen potential in him; potential that David may not have even seen in himself. Samuel had spoken God’s blessing into David’s life and the loss of that voice of encouragement most likely, left an enormous hole in David’s soul.

David probably had dreamed that one day, Samuel, his mentor, would see him crowned king. Could it be that this became an unprocessed loss in David’s life that ended up eating away at David’s heart?

With any loss comes grief and grief has its stages that help us heal emotionally. But all too often this normal process gets stalled or sidetracked or pushed underground. When we push our grief deep down inside of us, there are emotional consequences. And often the consequences of unprocessed loss and grief is anger. Could that be what we’re seeing here?

To make matters worse for David, King Saul was out to get him. Saul was jealous of David’s popularity and was determined to kill him. Could it be that David unleashes some deep underlying anger with the loss of his mentor? Who can say? But the death of Samuel stirred something in David because after Samuel’s death David becomes much more aggressive.

We need wise counselors in our lives who know the heart and character of God. David lost a wise mentor but as we saw, he gained a wise counselor in Abigail.

David moves his troops into the neighborhood of a wealthy landowner by the name of Nabal (whose name means fool). That has to be a nickname he earned for being “surly and mean in his dealings (see 25:3).”. I can’t imagine that Nabal’s parents looked at their brand new baby boy and said to each other, “Hey! Let’s name him ‘Fool’. That’ll be a great name! The kids in junior high are gonna be so jealous.”

The Message paraphrase of the Bible describes Nabal as “brutish” - not British. Brutish. As I read this story and thought about Nabal and Abigail, I was struck by the fact that this is an unlikely marital match. Somehow Nabal ended up with Abigail, who is said to be “intelligent and beautiful.” How that happened, I have no idea.

Marriages were arranged in those days, so poor Abigail ended up with this brute of a man. Both husband and wife live up to their initial descriptions later in this story. Maybe their marriage started out differently but now they are clearly in a conflicted relationship.

Samuel had reluctantly gone along with the demands of the people of Israel when they came to him and demanded that they have a king like the other nations. The point Samuel and, for that matter, God Himself tried to make with the people of Israel, is that they did not need a king because they already had one in God. They already had leaders who were called to lead the people under the leadership of God.

Whenever we lose sight of the fact that all of us are called to exercise our leadership, our influence, however big or small, under the authority of God Himself, it is precisely then that we can make big mistakes. It is then that we often abuse even the little power we have. And if our pride is wounded or we have deep underlying anger in our lives, we can be consumed by that anger and we can end up hurting other people. In this interaction with Nabal, David does something that is incredibly arrogant and extremely dangerous. He appoints himself judge, jury and executioner. It looks like David has lost sight of the fact that his authority, his leadership is to be exercised only as a follower of the King of Kings.

Saint and Sinner

What unfolds in chapter 25 is in dramatic contrast to what happened in chapter 24. In the previous chapter, David demonstrated tremendous restraint and respect for King Saul. David had already been secretly anointed king of Israel by Samuel. And now, the current King, this guy by the name of Saul, was intent on killing David. In the previous chapter, David and some of his men were hiding in a cave in an oasis called En

Gedi, which is near the Dead Sea.

Last summer, 50 people who traveled to Israel with Karen Makishima, Marianna Meachen and me, had the chance to hike up to the waterfalls and pools of this beautiful oasis in the desert. We saw the caves where David and his men were hiding.

Suddenly, king Saul enters one of the caves where David is hiding. It seems from the text that he needed to make, forgive me, “shishi”. David’s men wanted David to kill Saul on the spot. But David would not take advantage of Saul while he was in such a vulnerable position. David spared Saul’s life.

What unfolds here in 1Samuel 25 stands in stark contrast to the David we see in chapter 24. Saul was out to kill David but David had compassion on him. Here in chapter 25, brutish Nabal merely insults David and David is ready to kill him AND all the males in his household. Something has snapped in David.

What happens when something goes off in you? Do you stop and ask yourself, “What in the world that was all about?” It’s super important that we develop the capacity to be self-reflective. It takes courage to stop and ask ourselves about the inner motivations behind our actions and reactions. Little good can come if we are unable to be self-reflective. An inability to be self-reflective, when it is coupled with wounded pride and underlying anger is a recipe for disaster.

Sometimes, when we possess even a modicum of power in a given situation, we think we

don’t have to do this kind of self-reflection.

If we’re the boss, we can convince ourselves that it all about the poor performance of our employees and has nothing to do with the way we’re leading them. When we are unwilling to stop and ask ourselves about our reactions, we have become a hazard to everyone around us. If we are unable to stop ourselves when our emotions get away from us, if we are unwilling to ask ourselves why we reacted the way we did, we’re in trouble.

Just because we have power does not give us the right to act in anyway that we might want to act. Every single one of us who are followers of Jesus are people whose leadership is to be exercised under the authority of Christ. This is a very important lesson I continue to learn.

The Fight

So, what’s this fight between David and Nabal all about? Nabal’s got some money. He’s in the process of shearing his sheep, all 3000 of them. When David hears that Nabal is shearing his flock, he sees an opportunity to get paid for protecting Nabal’s shepherds and herds. So, David sends 10 guys to ask Nabal to give him provisions for he and his men. David believes that Nabal owes him this payment since he had prevented Nabal’s shepherds and sheep from being harassed while they were grazing their flocks.

Nabal does not seem to have requested David’s protection. This is not quite an act of extortion on David’s part but it appears that David is demanding payment for protection Nabal did not ask for.

One commentator writes, “It is unclear how exactly David’s men serviced Nabal’s shepherds, as they only mention that they did not mistreat them or steal anything from them. This is not exactly something that seems worthy of payment.”¹

Another scholar point out that in the ancient Near East, offering this kind of protection to shepherds was a common practice since it was assumed that it was, in general, a dangerous place to graze sheep. By protecting Nabal’s shepherds and flocks, David believed he was completely within his rights to ask for “protection money”. According to the culture and practice of his day, David was entitled to some cash or some supplies from Nabal.

Here’s the problem with what David is doing. This may have been the way things were done in David’s day but his decision to pursue this action does not reflect well on him. This IS the way people did things in the other nations. But Israel was called to be a distinctive nation and not live like the nations that surrounded them. David is veering out of the God defined, distinctive lane that God had given the people of Israel and is acting just like the kings that surrounded Israel.

When the events of this chapter are placed alongside the events of the previous chapter we have a vivid picture of the battle that takes place in all of us. We are called to live distinctively different lives and yet we find ourselves compelled to adopt the strategies of those who live around us who do not know God. We are in an epic battle for who is going to form our

characters and what set of values and priorities will ultimately shape what guides our lives.

Here’s the fight: David wants provisions that Nabal has. He sends 10 young guys to ask politely for Nabal’s payment. Nabal says, “No!” David flips out. It seems that this is not a matter of life and death for David and his men since David leaves 200 guys behind to guard the supplies they already had.

And here’s the even larger context of the fight. The region where Nabal lives is a place where King Saul had built a monument to himself. It seems likely that Nabal is probably a supporter of Saul and looks at David as a usurper. He accuses David of being one of many rebellious servants who “are breaking away from their masters these days.”

Unlike the restrained David we have seen before, David is ready to kill a lot of people due to the rudeness of one “brutish” man. David’s wounded pride is leading him to a disaster. Slaughtering the house of Nabal would not only have been wrong, but it would have undermined his support from Israelites in the area. David was on the verge of making a very bad choice. His rise to power that was, up to then, free of blood-guilt, was now threatened. Neither Nabal nor David have the moral high ground in this story. The only person who comes close to reflecting the character and wisdom of God is the woman that God graciously sends to intervene.

Abigail the Leader

Abigail plays a similar role that Mordecai played in Esther’s

life (do you remember that guy?). Both Mordecai and Abigail call others to live into their God-shaped character. We need Abigail’s and Mordecai’s in our lives.

Here are the characteristics of a great leader that we see in Abigail: Humility, emotional intelligence, wisdom, restraint. These are all characteristics of a good leader.

Let’s look at the evidence of Abigail’s leadership abilities. Nabal’s servant trusts her. As I said a few weeks ago, trust is the foundation of leadership. The servant that runs to Abigail to tell her that trouble is brewing knows her. He knows he can trust her with his concerns. He knows she’s a clear-thinking, reasonable person who will take the right action.

Look at what unfolds in this story. God spares David through the intervention of Abigail. Unlike her husband, Abigail shows great humility and respect when she meets David, bowing and falling at his feet (25:23-24). Abigail is a woman who’s fed up with her husband and his propensity to live up to the meaning of his name.

Listen to Abigail’s wise counsel. David had lost Samuel, his mentor. Abigail will offer David some coaching. She points out the gift she has brought and expresses her faith that God is going to make David king. She encourages him to avoid avenging himself. She knows how to build trust. She communicates, indirectly to David, that she knows something about him.

¹ 1-2 Samuel (The Story of God Commentary), Paul S. Evans

She alludes to David's victory over Goliath with a sling (25:29) and pleads for David's forgiveness.

Interestingly, she reminds David that God had kept him from bloodshed and from avenging himself with his own hands (25:26). She apparently had knowledge of the events that occurred in the caves of En Gedi (1 Samuel 24).

Abigail's speech opened David's eyes. As he listens to her he realizes how close he was to blowing it. David responds with praise to God for sending Abigail to keep him from bloodshed and from avenging himself. David begins to take some deep breaths and cool down. He assures Abigail that he will not attack but will grant her request.

Abigail is a skillful negotiator whose leadership in this moment made possible a significant turning point in David's life. Abigail's wise word to David was, "Trust God with your future, David. Don't avenge yourself. God will take care of all of that."

Our sinful nature wants us to act out in anger, to nurse our wounded pride and take revenge. We must leave our desire for vengeance with God. As God says, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay" (Deut. 32:35). Abigail is a skillful diplomat. She is the leader this situation needed. Because she acts courageously, a disaster, for a lot of people, was averted.

I think Queen Elizabeth II is one of the great leaders of our time. From the time she worked on cars during World War II, to driving her own car to church when she was in her 90's, Queen

Elizabeth has been a remarkable leader. She is currently working with the Commonwealth of nations to fight climate change. She's challenging nations all around the Commonwealth to protect important natural habitats that are needed to sequester carbon in our environment.

In the British television series about Queen Elizabeth II called *The Crown*, there is a scene where a much younger Queen Elizabeth outfoxes the Soviet Union by charming the Ghanaian leader who was about to give the Soviets a foothold in Africa. Her diplomatic efforts culminate in this moment I'm going to show you. Because of her negotiating prowess, leads to a renewed commitment by the US to fund a hydro-electric dam. That development project in Ghana made that nation less vulnerable to the Soviet Union ploys. This true story shows the leadership skills of a remarkable monarch. Here's that scene from *The Crown*.²

Are we willing to pursue a path of peace-making in our lives? A later anointed King of Israel and "son of David," our Lord Jesus, when the authorities hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to the One who judges justly (1 Pet 2:23). And we are called to "follow in His steps" (1 Pet 2:21).

A Few Conclusions

So, here are some conclusions. God may have said other things to you, but here's what I noticed in this text.

- First, we all make mistakes. But those mistakes do not need

- to be the end of our stories. We have a God who is all about fixing big blunders.
- We all need wise counselors in our lives who can get us back on course if we are veering into a ditch.
- We need to develop the capacity to be self-reflective. We need to be able to process our losses well and to be aware of how blind we can become when our pride has been wounded.
- We need to remember that wherever we have power, the exercise of that power must be under the authority of Jesus Christ. We are accountable to Him.
- Great leaders are also great followers. David's willingness to admit he was wrong and follow the lead of another shows that he has the capacity to be a great leader.
- Being willing to be a maker of peace is as at least as courageous as charging into battle with your sword drawn. Abigail show us what great leadership looks like.

Abigail is the wisest, most courageous, most selfless character in the story. She is the hero. Lord Jesus, make us more like her.

But the ultimate hero in the human story is Jesus Christ. He is the one in whom we can place our full confidence and trust. May God continue to shape our character, more and more, to be like His.

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Note: Sunday sermon texts, as well as audio & video recordings of sermons, are also available at fpchawaii.org by clicking the eSermons tab.

² https://youtu.be/88NtZcPI_wM