

Matthew 7:1-5

‘Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. ²For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. ³Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴Or how can you say to your neighbor, “Let me take the speck out of your eye”, while the log is in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye.

1 Samuel 17 (selections).

¹Now the Philistines gathered their armies for battle. ³The Philistines stood on the mountain on one side, and Israel stood on the mountain on the other side, with a valley between them. ⁴And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath, of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. ⁵He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armored with a coat of mail; the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. ⁶He had greaves of bronze on his legs and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. ⁷The shaft of his spear was like a weaver’s beam, and his spear’s head weighed six hundred shekels of iron; and his shield-bearer went before him. ⁸He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, ‘Why have you come out to draw up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. ⁹If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants; but if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us.’ ¹⁰And the Philistine said, ‘Today I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man, that we may fight together.’ ¹¹When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.

³²David said to Saul, ‘Let no one’s heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.’ ³³Saul said to David, ‘You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth.’ ³⁴But David said to Saul, ‘Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, ³⁵I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. ³⁶Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God.’ ³⁷David said, ‘The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of this Philistine.’ So Saul said to David, ‘Go, and may the Lord be with you!’

³⁸ Saul clothed David with his armor; he put a bronze helmet on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail. ³⁹David strapped Saul’s sword over the armor, and he tried in vain to walk, for he was not used to them. Then David said to Saul, ‘I cannot walk with these; for I am not used to them.’ So David removed them. ⁴⁰Then he took his staff in his hand, and chose five smooth stones from the wadi, and put them in his shepherd’s bag, in the pouch; his sling was in his hand, and he drew near to the Philistine.

*Jesus is the center of our faith. Community is the center of our life. Reconciliation is the center of our work.*¹ This morning we continue to think about that ‘thick’ term of reconciliation – of all things being in right relationship, both personally and society-wide – how we might participate with God in this work of reconciliation: within ourselves, with God, with one another, and with all of creation.

If our scripture reading this morning were a comic book or Marvel movie, we would think of this “David and Goliath” story as David’s origin story; it would be volume number one in the series.

David a young shepherd boy has brothers fighting in a great battle against the dreaded Philistines. And the Philistines have this great warrior Goliath, who is somewhere between 6’6” and 13’ tall, depending on your Bible translation and your arm length (a cubit is the distance from a person’s elbow to the tip of a finger, so it varies from person-to-person). David comes to see how things are at the front lines, and he hears they are afraid – no one is willing to go and face Goliath who stands in front and taunts them. David is not afraid, he says he is up to the challenge. They tell him that he is too young and small, but he insists he can do it – he has taken down mighty beasts in protecting his sheep, he is convinced he can take down Goliath. The Generals agree, presumably because no one else is willing to take on the task, they try to put armor on him, but he is too small. He takes only his shepherd’s staff, five smooth stones from

¹ This is the summary of Anabaptist faith from Palmer Becker.

the river, and his slingshot. And – spoiler alert – this is all he needs to take down Goliath, it takes him just one throw.

And, as you might remember, this is the legend that propels David to eventually become king of all of Israel. David who presides over the Golden Era of the kingdom of Israel. Just as some in our society think we need to go back to the 1950s as the Golden Era of America, the Israelites of Jesus' day would have wanted to go back to when David was king as their Golden Era.

For some reason, as I have been thinking and reading about reconciliation these past weeks, the story of David and Goliath keeps coming to mind – probably because it seems like such an anti-reconciliation story, it ends with the enemy Goliath being defeated by one of David's stones and then David cutting off his enemies head with his own sword. As I think about shalom and reconciliation, about the way of Jesus being that which seeks to bring everyone into the light – the way which seeks to liberate both the oppressed and the oppressor – this story of David and Goliath (along with many other Old Testament battle stories) does not seem to mesh well with this view of reconciliation. It does not seem that David is concerned with the liberation of Goliath and the Philistines, only with winning the battle.

Of course, as Anabaptist-Mennonites who read the Bible through the lens of Jesus, we can say that we don't really have to deal with this story's violence too much as we read it through the lens of "The Sermon on the Mount", through the filter of Jesus saying to "love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us", the filter of Jesus telling us to not even judge others. And yet, this does not stop us telling this story over and over again as a hero story – a story of God being with the weak against the mighty. It does not stop us from putting this story in every children's

bible story book with a message of do not be afraid, or God will protect those who serve God, or small but mighty. It makes for a good story to tell and enact – here are just a few David & Goliath action figures from a quick Google Images search (and why do Christians just make the same stuff type of stuff, but worse? Instead of making different things, we just copy culture but do it cheaply and lamely – worse action figures; worse contemporary music). I think this story has had a very formative and shaping impact on we Christians and Jews who have read it over the centuries, as we of course identify ourselves or our people group with David – that we are the ones who follow after God, and that we are the ones that God will protect. This story has shaped us as a nation from our very beginnings – George Washington and the Minute Men being David, and King George and the British army being Goliath. And we probably haven't ever let that reading go, not matter how big our army has gotten or how inflated our military budget.

But perhaps when we read this story before we are fully enculturated into an “us and them” mentality, we might see the story a bit differently. One theologian who brought this to my attention was Sofiya Nickel, the five-year daughter of my friend David. After studying “David and Goliath” in Sunday School that morning, she came to him later that evening – clearly this story had been weighing on her mind– she said, “Dad, God really didn't want David to kill Goliath, right?” Her lens of God loving all people, it just could not hold together with this story of someone being killed. She had yet to be formed into a “God is for us and not them” mentality.

I wonder if perhaps “David and Goliath” is not supposed to be interpreted as such an “us versus them” type of story. I wonder if perhaps this might actually be an anti-militarism story, a story that is against the building of gigantic armies in whom we put our hope and trust. If we take a metaphorical/allegorical reading of this story, we might say that Goliath represents the largest

army or most fierce weapon on his time. The Philistines have absolute trust in their newest and shiniest new war technology to save them, they trust in Goliath. We might say that Goliath is the nuclear weapon of his time, the Big-Boy Boomeroo² that will keep everyone else from messing with them and let them butter their bread how they see best. The Philistines have their full trust in Goliath to keep them safe, their full trust in their latest weapon of war, in the size of their army.

And what the story tells us, is that no army can ever keep us completely safe and secure, that putting our trust in the biggest army and in the latest technology of war can never keep us safe – for one shepherd boy is able to take him down. Further, in this story, we see that the weapons of war do not fit David – the weapons of war do not fit the one who scripture says “is someone after God’s own heart.” For the one who puts their trust in God, the weapons of war will never fit.

To push such a metaphorical reading to our time, I think we would have to conclude that *we are Goliath*, we are the ones who stand behind the latest military technology of our time – of our army that is bigger and taller and more fierce than any other army in the world, trusting that this will keep us safe. But having Goliath on our side has not kept us free from fear, one could probably make the case that we are in fact the most fearful nation in the world (at least outside of any active war zone). And having a Goliath-sized military, and shiny Goliath nuclear weapons has not kept us safe from mass shootings, and bombings, and attacks of terror.

² This comes from Dr. Seuss’ *The Butter Battle Book*, which was read during the Children’s Time for this Sunday. The “Big-Boy Boomeroo” is the final weapon made for the Yooks, to keep them safe from the Zooks.

I wonder if perhaps this story that we have glorified, this story we have used to explicitly and implicitly further our view of Christian and Jewish and American and European superiority, this story of God being on our side – if this is actually a story to be read against us. A story meant to name and unmask the power of militarism and nationalism – to be read against our militarism, against our continuing to add to the largest defense budget on the planet – a story against our trusting in nuclear weapons and drones and five-star generals; a story to remind us that putting our trust in these military arenas is a false sense of trust. A story meant to dislodge us, to stir us, to awaken us to all the ways we falsely trust in military might.

But it is hard to read and hear stories in this way, because we of course see ourselves as David and not as Goliath. This is part of how we work as individuals and people groups – part of how we form our identity and make meaning in the world – by telling stories and metaphors for us, and in favor us, that confirm our view of the world. To not allow something to disturb us and shake the way we see things, but rather to keep things in-line with how they have always been, with how they make sense to us.

Such stories we tell ourselves and how we tell them “aren’t always true, but they are comforting because they help us to make sense of our world. They give us security and identity, and they are what differentiates us from other people. In other words, our metaphors are different from their metaphors; our stories are different from their stories.”³

³ Brenda Salter McNeil in *Roadmap to Reconciliation: moving Communities into Unity, Wholeness, and Justice*.

And for all of us, personal change entails an alteration of those metaphors and the stories we've been telling ourselves, or at least in how we have been telling them.

We form groups to which we cling as our places of refuge and identity – these are important for forming our identity and sense of self – the world makes sense to us here, and our identity is affirmed when we are in close proximity with those who share our worldview and sense of values. “Usually, the other people in our group mirror who we are and socialize us to believe certain things about ourselves and others...Everybody does this. But when we hold too tightly and refuse to interact with others outside our circle”, this is what professor Brenda Salter McNeil calls “being in a *state of preservation*.”

How do we begin to dislodge ourselves from such a state of preservation? How do we begin to have both a vital identity and set of values, while at the same time, being open to the perspectives and realities of others? Of allowing others to speak into our experience and allow their perspectives to interact with our own?

Of course, we have to begin with awareness. We have to recognize a need for allowing others to enter into the stories we tell and how we tell them, we have to acknowledge that, from where we stand, we do not have the full picture: the full picture of the human experience, or the full picture of who God is and what God is doing in the world. We must try to come to an awareness of our biases, both explicit and implicit. I took an implicit bias test⁴ this week. I was dismayed to learn the results of that test, it said that I have ***a strong automatic preference for European***

⁴ This Implicit Bias test comes from Harvard and can be found at <http://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/education.html>

Americans over African Americans. I knew that it would show some preference, because we all have bias, but I was surprised that mine came out as “strong” – there was “strong”, “moderate”, and “slight” – I was really hoping for “moderate” or “slight”. This might seem like a small thing, but I think growing our awareness is a key starting point, it alerts us to our vast need for the perspectives of others, it helps us see the incompleteness of our own stories.⁵

A second way of dislodging ourselves from a state of preservation comes from social psychology, an idea called *Contact Theory*, which suggests that relationships between conflicting groups will improve if they have meaningful contact with one another over an extended period of time. According to the theory, if diverse groups spend extended time together, their intergroup conflict and the negative effects of racism and ethnocentrism will gradually decrease and possibly even disappear altogether.⁶ This is not new to us, everything I have ever read on reconciliation and racism, every seminar or class I have taken, they all say that we have to begin with relationship – we have to begin with places of authentically sharing our lives and knowing each other. While we know this, we also know that this can be hard and takes time – perhaps it will begin with asking ourselves who we are reading, who we are listening to, and who are the voices shaping our stories and realities. We must trust that the stranger that God has brought into our lives has something for us, to try and listen openly and allow others to tell their story from their own perspective.

⁵ Lisa Sharon Harper gives this account of the need for awareness in her chapter “Shalom and Race” in *The Very Good Gospel*.

⁶ Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation*, p.33-34.

And finally, in her book *The Very Good Gospel*, Lisa Harper from the Sojourners Community in Washington, D. C. writes about something she has been trying this past year to try and truly allow other perspectives to enter into her own life and thinking. Harper says she is trying to look for the uniqueness in each person, not stereotypes. She writes that, “When I’m talking with someone and am tempted to write the person off as “just another _____”, (fill-in-the-blank, “Just another conservative”, “just another liberal”, “just another wealthy person”, “just another homeless person”) I look the person in the eyes (if I can) and remember that the image of God lives inside that person. I try to sit in that truth. I try to really listen again. “Suddenly”, she says, “the person becomes fully human to me, with stories, histories, dreams, struggles, joys, and strengths.”

And this is all of our work to do. I think the day of the single superstar is over.⁷ The way forward will require cooperation and partnership, rather than waiting on the next great leader like Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Dr. King, or Dorothy Day to show us how to solve our local and global problems, it will take us all offering our views and stories – offering the face of God we know best – while at the same time, taking seriously the stories and perspectives of others. Change can happen through taking seriously those who are different than ourselves, or by simply taking seriously the perspective of our five-year old theologians. May the God of all people empower us to be such a people. Amen.

⁷ Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation*, p66.

