

Who Is Our God?
I Samuel 8:4-20
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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How could they ask this? After all these years. He had given his life to them. Well, his mother had first given his life, dedicating him to God before he was even conceived. But he had been faithful. Once he knew the sound of God's voice he had been committed to speak even a difficult word to the people. He had done that with his dear mentor when the word for Eli's family was doom, and he had done so for the people of Israel calling them back to God, praying on their behalf. He had given them his life.

And yet here they stood before him asking for a king.

Yes, they were right. His sons weren't the judges he hoped they would be. They found more joy in taking bribes than in doing justice. He knew the people were right, Israel couldn't be left in their hands. But there were many faithful people among them. Why did they think they needed a king?

It felt like a personal attack...like they were unsatisfied with all he had done for them. Although when he went to Yahweh, Yahweh reassured that it wasn't him but God they were rejecting. As if that felt any better. After all, Samuel had been for them the voice of God...maybe, for better or worse, sometimes even the face of God.

Either way – whether they rejected Yahweh or him or both – it hurt. And he knew...he just knew that this wasn't a good choice.

But Yahweh said to let them. Let them choose. Let them have what they want.

He wasn't sure he could. But he knew he needed to. After all, he hadn't spent his life sidestepping Yahweh's commands. Why start now? So, he would go along with it. But not without warning.

"Don't you know what a king will do?" he asked. "Look around. You think kings make nations strong. You think kings make nations secure. But have you really paid attention? Kings take what belongs to the people – they put the young men in the army to fight their battles, they force the young women to serve them. They don't only take your children, but they will take your land, your money, your servants, your harvest. Everything you think is yours will be yours no longer. Because when a king says, 'Give it to me,' you have no choice. You think a king will bring you glory; but watch out. Kings only bring glory to themselves."

But what could he do? Still they cried for a king. And Yahweh was prepared to give them what they wanted. How could Samuel do anything else?

When the people asked for a king, Samuel warned them about what would happen, what they would lose. But the reality was that for God it was much bigger than that. This wasn't just about God wanting them to keep their stuff or their system, but it was about where their first loyalties were.

We enter into the Israel's story today at another point of transition. They have been living for years with a system of judges, one of whom was Samuel. But for some reason, at this point, they cried out for a central government...they asked to be given a king. It seems they had looked around at other nations, they had seen the ways other nations looked stronger. Meanwhile, they were living in the midst of ongoing conflict with the Philistines and were perhaps feeling vulnerable. And so, they asked for a king.

And yet, both the response from Samuel and from God were responses of rejection...not rejection of the people, but feeling rejected themselves as the people of Israel asked to be governed differently. They also responded from a point of knowing what lie ahead, much like parents who watch their children make bad choices.

And so, Samuel was strategic in his words. Honestly, he knew people well enough to know that they would take notice a little more quickly if he pointed out how this choice could cause them difficulty rather than if he just told them that God's heart was broken by their request or that God wanted to be their first priority.

But, ultimately that was what God wanted.

And ultimately that remains what God wants.

See this text is about far more than which system of government would work best for the ancient people of faith. This text is about far more than being a story to explain the pickle Israel eventually ended up in through a system of kings. In fact, even though this passage is clear, the Bible is not single-minded about the idea of kings...there are some passages of affirmation for the kingship. So, this text is about far more than a story of how Israel transitioned from theocracy to monarchy. This text is also about far more than just the ancient people.

See, it poses a question for us as well.

This text is one of many in the Bible that asks us to consider again where our first loyalties lie.

You might remember when I recently mentioned the exercise where I asked a group of young people to write down a number of different things to describe themselves. They did this

by completing sentences that started with the words, “I am...” And you might remember that after that exercise I asked them to all add one thing to the list: I am a child of God.

See, no one had listed it. I’ve done this exercise time and time again over the years with both youth and adults and rarely does anyone list it...more rarely does anyone list it first. We may tell ourselves that it’s because it is a given...of course, we are children of God. We may tell ourselves that some things we know without naming...because it seems so obvious we don’t even need to write it down. And yet, the reality is that it is simply often not our first response.

Who are we first? Yes, we know we are children of God, but is that where our first loyalties lie? Is God the one who has our primary allegiance?

And while today’s story is about far more than politics or systems of government, it seems that in our life and times this very topic illustrates well the struggle we continue to have with the question of who we are and who has our primary allegiance.

Especially at this time in our country where so many things seem to be divided by our political affiliation, I wonder how often we are able to take off our political lenses and really see things through the eyes of our faith.

I am often saddened as I watch people who act as if our country is in a bad divorce, as if we have divvy up everything so that the Republicans get this and the Democrats get that. Even when we can be logical and know that rarely are any divisions that clear, it seems that we so easily fall back into that habit and we draw lines around everything from political stances to social issues to even religious language, and assign some to one political group and some to the other.

In a casual conversation today, I find that I am far more likely to learn quickly whether a person is a Democrat or a Republican than I am to learn what their profession is or where they were born or if they are a person of faith.

Not long before I moved here I had a conversation with a member of the congregation I previously served. He was struggling with some things he had heard in church and feeling like they were too political. This is how I responded. First, I assured him that the church staff worked hard to recognize that our congregation had people from all points on the political spectrum and we worked hard to honor that. Secondly, I asked him to pay attention – while there were things mentioned in church that were also being talked about by elected officials, when those topics came up in church they came through the pages of the Bible and through the lens of faith. Finally, I asked him a favor. I asked him to work hard to remove his political lenses when he walked in the building and to put on his faith lenses.

See, what I had noticed and continue to notice is that whatever the topic is, people often go at it first through the eyes of their preferred political party. And yet this approach seems to divide us more often than bring us together.

As a people who worship a God who is the God of all people...as a people who follow Jesus who was about reaching across boundaries and was seen healing and eating with the official leaders as well as with the rejected outcasts...as a people who are part of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), a denomination founded on a belief in Christian unity...we have a responsibility to see beyond the systems that divide us.

And I continue to believe that if we are willing to wear our faith lenses as our primary lenses, that we will find that more often than not we are discovering common ground.

This doesn't mean we will always be in perfect agreement. This doesn't mean we will always vote the same way. This doesn't mean we won't have different understandings and preferences.

But when we understand ourselves first as children of God, it changes not only how we see the world but also how we interact with people, especially those who are different from us.

Just as you do, I have many layers to my identity. I am Doug and Linda's daughter. I am Amy's sister. I am Jim's wife. I am the mother of Cameron and Teegan, step-mother of Katy and John. I am a friend to many. I am your pastor. I am a citizen of the United States of America. I am a person who is concerned about gun violence and the rights of our LGBTQ friends and racial equality.

But before any of that I am a child of God.

The reality is that every moment of every day I do not live fully into that identity. Sometimes I choose to give more of myself to something else. And sometimes I reject God, knowingly or unknowingly, in that choice. I suspect you are the same.

Which is why we need to hear this call again and again. It is why we need to be reminded again and again of whose we are. While we inhabit this country...while we claim membership in political parties...while we choose group affiliations...while we belong to families and to friend groups...while all of this is true, we are called again and again back to our first identity. We are called again and again to allegiance to our loving God. We are called again and again to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. We are called again and again to live in God's ways in all that we do and to choose God's ways as our first priority.

Amen.