

“Church and State”
2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19

Today’s Bible story from 2 Samuel is about King David’s bringing of the Ark of the covenant to the city of Jerusalem. This was a major ordeal for the people of Israel and we are told about a big celebration that day. Yet, in the middle of that celebration, we hear about Michal, the wife of King David being upset with David and even despising him. I would like to explore with you today why Michal might have felt this way. I will be sharing this in the first person.

“My name is Michal. I am the daughter of King Saul and the wife of King David. My father was the first king in Israel. My husband was the second and most important king of Israel. My marriage to David was arranged by my father in order to get rid of David. My father wanted to kill David because he saw him as a rival for the throne, so he asked me to marry David and then set him up to have him killed. But I loved David so much that I disobeyed my father and helped my husband escape a death squad sent by my father. My father punished me and took me away from David and gave me in marriage to another man, Paltiel. My other husband, Paltiel truly loved me. But later on, when David became king and got rid of my father, he reclaimed me as his wife. He made the deal with Abner, my cousin and my father’s army leader, to have me returned to him. He had plenty of other wives, but he still saw my political significance as the daughter of the previous king. He also loved me and wanted me to be part of his life. Yet, on that day when he came back to Jerusalem bringing the Ark of the Covenant with him, things changed between us forever. I despised what David was doing but not many people understood why. The Ark of the Covenant was the most sacred symbol of my people. The Ark of the Covenant was the wooden chest that contained the tablets upon which were written the Ten Commandments (Num. 10-14). To my people, the Israelites, it was much more than a box holding some special stones! We saw it as an extension or embodiment of the presence of Yahweh of God. (Num. 10:35-36; I Sam. 6:3, 5, 8, 20). We saw it as a symbol of the very covenant that made Israel into one nation of distinct tribes, centered around the Ten Commandments (Exod. 25:16, 21; I Kings 8:21; II Chr. 6:11), and as a portable throne for the invisible presence of God. The Ark reminded us that God was with us wherever we went and that God was our true king. We were tribal people connected through faith in God. But that day when David brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, he domesticated God’s presence and limited it to one place. This was a brilliant military and political strategy but it was a terrible move for our faith as a people. Basically, our faith in God became a political tool to serve David’s political agenda of uniting the northern and southern kingdoms. Oh, how that hurt me deeply. I was happy for David to be king, but I wished that he did not use the faith of our ancestors to serve his political career. My people believed that God is not limited to one city or one ruler. But David had big plans for his career. He also wanted to build a temple in Jerusalem to really make his rule there even more important. That city was known before David as the city of God, but after David, it became the City of David. I know that many people loved David and I know that David was trying to be faithful in his own way. But I wish he had not made that move to limit God’s presence to the political agenda of a king, even if that king was my husband, the man I loved!”

This is a side of the story we normally do not hear. We often hear about King David as someone who brought the people of Israel together and created a powerful and a united kingdom for them. After all, he is known to be ‘a man after God’s own heart.’ (1 Samuel 13:14) Many of the Psalms are attributed to David because of his faith. But the danger of combining religion and politics is an age-old problem. Even though David was blessed with faith and had a close relationship with God, his political ambitions were also strong and often conflicted with his faith. Today’s story illustrated that conflict when David brought the Ark into the center of his kingdom.

Even though the focus seemed like it was on God, it was truly on David's political and military ambitions. The negative influence of this move is to switch people's thinking and understanding of God. The shift was from a God who was accessible to all people where power was shared equally to an understanding of a God who has to be accessed through the king and the priests and where power is hierarchical. The freedom and creativity of the experience of God in the wilderness was replaced by a highly ritualized and domesticated way of dealing with God. I am sure that David did not intend for this to happen. However, this is often what happens when religion is so closely aligned or even controlled by political power.

In his book, *Crossing the Gods*, Professor N. J. Demerath notes that, "The image of a moth circling a flame is virtually universal. Moths everywhere are drawn to the warmth and light of a flame, and moths everywhere risk an igniting fate similar to the mythical Greek Icarus who perished when flying too close to the sun. The object is to fly near enough to the heat to receive its benefits without flying so near as to suffer its costs...Most religions have a social agenda not only for themselves and their members but for the society around them. Many religions define their very rationale in the mission to confront sin and sloth in the world beyond their sanctuaries...But like the moth, religion increases both its possible gains and possible losses by approaching the political flame too closely... States frequently align themselves with religion in order to control it. They even provide funds for religion as long as it conforms to state rules and regulations."

As a nation we are steeped in the tradition of separation between church and state and for good reasons. Yet, throughout our history we have struggled with this issue. In his book, *Religious Pluralism in America*, Harvard Professor William Hutchison tells about an interesting episode in our history. "In 1863, during the darkest days of the Civil War, an organization was formed that bore the broad and liberal-sounding name of National Reform Association...The purpose was to write the Christian religion into the United States Constitution. What the reformers had in mind was not an end to church-state separation... In a statement set before the president of the United States in the hope of gaining his support, the association assured Mr. Lincoln that 'we ask for no union of Church and State –that is a thing which we utterly repudiate; we ask for nothing inconsistent with the largest liberty...' All they wanted...was a constitutional amendment affirming that the United States is a Christian nation. The petition to Congress that they showed Lincoln included a new working for the preamble to that Constitution... 'We the people of the United States, humbly acknowledging Almighty God as the sources of all authority and power in civil government, the Lord Jesus Christ as the Ruler among the nations, and His revealed will as the supreme law of the land, in order to constitute a Christian government and, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the inalienable rights and the blessings of liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to ourselves, our prosperity, and all the people, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.' The Congress, and probably a comfortable majority of those who were elected congressmen, found the amendment idea unworkable; some found it downright abhorrent."

It is a fine line that we walk between faith and politics. As people of faith we care about the well being of our society and our world. We are even commissioned to love and serve the whole world. At the same time, the way of God's love is the way of powerlessness and openness to the suffering of the world. This is hardly ever the way of our political world. No matter how much we love our political leaders, the way they are commissioned to lead is based on control, power and protecting the interests of their country and their power base. The church cannot be co-opted by those ways. Christ's servant way that led him to the cross is a hard example to follow. It is much easier to follow the ways of power and control. The power of God is most often found

in what the world considers to be weak. The power of God is about the power of love and healing, not domination and control. So, it is important to keep enough distance between church and state so that the prophetic ministry of the church is not diluted or co-opted. We pray for our governments and leaders. We support and challenge them. Many of us as Presbyterians have been and are in those positions of leadership. Yet, the distance is needed because our history is littered with examples where the church was the agent or at least an accomplice of the state: The crusades, the Inquisition, Nazi Christianity, and many others. These are examples of how people over the centuries have domesticated God's presence to fit their political agendas. A sure sign that we have domesticated God's presence is when as Anne Lamott put it, "You can safely assume that you made God in your own image when it turns out that God hates the same people that you do."

Our spiritual journey can be unsettling to not only our political agendas but also to our personal ones. In his book, *The Dignity of Difference*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes that, "The pursuit of peace can come to seem to be a kind of betrayal. It involves compromise. It means settling for less than we would like...Peace involves a profound crisis of identity. The boundaries of self and other, friend and foe, must be redrawn."

As Christians, followers of Christ, we have to always be willing to let go of our power and control. This is the only way we can bring transformation to the world. This is the only way we allow God's Spirit to transform us. Surrender is not the easiest way, but it is the way to truth. This is why Jesus refused to be the Messiah in the style of a political leader such as King David. Here is a story about the power of letting go. "Once upon a time, in a not-so-faraway land, there was a kingdom of acorns, nestled at the foot of a grand old oak tree. Since the citizens of this kingdom were modern, fully Westernized acorns, they went about their business with purposeful energy; and since they were midlife, baby-boomer acorns, they engaged in a lot of self-help courses. There were seminars called "Getting All You Can out of Your Shell". There were woundedness and recovery groups for acorns who had been bruised in their original fall from the tree. There were spas for oiling and polishing those shells and various acornopathic therapies to enhance longevity and well-being. One day in the midst of this kingdom there suddenly appeared a knotty little stranger, apparently dropped "out of the blue" by a passing bird. He was capless and dirty, making an immediate negative impression on his fellow acorns. And, crouched beneath the oak tree, he stammered out a wild tale. Pointing upward at the tree, he said, 'We... are... that!' Delusional thinking, obviously, the other acorns concluded, but one of them continued to engage him in conversation: "So tell us, how would we become that tree?" "Well," he said, pointing downward, "It has something to do with going into the ground... and cracking open the shell." "Insane," they responded. "Totally morbid! Why, then we wouldn't be acorns anymore." (By Cynthia Bourgeault in the *Wisdom Way of Knowing*) Amen.