



Samson & Delilah



A Sermon By
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July 15, 2018
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

Sarah & Hagar

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Judges 16:4-21
Psalm 56:1-6, 10

1 Corinthians 13:9-12
Matthew 15:21-28

In today's gospel we hear about a Jesus who is very much formed and conditioned by his upbringing and surroundings. Jesus displays the bias of his conditioning in his encounter with a Canaanite woman. She, a non-Jew, pleads with Jesus, a Jew, to heal her daughter. The text tells us that Jesus ignores her. He gives her the cold shoulder. And he's not alone. The disciples are annoyed by her and want her gone. "Send her away," they say. Jesus attempted to do just that. He told her that he was sent "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In other words, "I'm a Jew and my ministry is to the Jews. You are not a Jew. Go away." These feel like harsh, partisan words coming from Jesus. But I think he said them because at this point in his ministry, Jesus understood his mission and God's grace to belong to the Jews. He thought this because he was conditioned to believe it. He was brought up in a Jewish household, worshiped in the synagogue, faithfully learned and could recite Hebrew scripture. He was raised to believe that God favored one people over another. And yet, this woman, this Canaanite woman, this woman who was other, through her persistence, her ability to debate and her faith, turned Jesus' heart. In this encounter with her, Jesus realized that his understanding of God and God's grace had been too narrow. In other words, Jesus recognized that he had it wrong. He had missed the mark. Yes, Jesus, even Jesus, messed up. He allowed his preconceived notions to threaten the extension of God's grace.

Like Jesus in this story, we too have been conditioned in ways that contribute to our missing the mark at times. Sometimes our preconceived notions mess us up and we think we have it right. Our way is the way. It's either black or it's white. No gray. And unfortunately, sometimes the way we've been conditioned to understand scripture contributes to that scenario.

Take for example, Samson and Delilah, the two individuals we look at today in our summer preaching series, *Characters of the Bible*. Their story is memorialized in cinema, television, children's cartoons, and even an Elvis Presley song. But almost all of these mediums get their story wrong. And we, being influenced and conditioned by these mediums, also tend to misunderstand Samson and Delilah.

In preparation for my sermon today, I asked a number of people what they know about these two. For Samson, common answers included that he had long hair and was a hero whose love for a woman betrayed him. And Delilah? Most people thought of her as a femme fatale, a man-eater whose seductive charms ensnared Samson and led him into trouble.

That is one perspective of their story. It's certainly the prevalent narrative portrayed in the aforementioned media, but it is not necessarily the story portrayed in scripture. It's the narrative many of us have been come to believe, but I invite you to take another look at the story portrayed in our first reading from Judges.

This pericope of scripture is one of the last chapters in Samson's story. It is the first and only section of scripture to describe Delilah. In the chapters preceding our passage, we learn that Samson is one of the Judges of Israel. Samson lived in a time before the Jewish kings, before Saul, before David, a time when the twelve tribes of Israel were championed by judges. These folks were not judges as we think of the term. They didn't uphold the justice system. Rather, in this period, Israel's judges were military leaders, or in the case of Samson, a solitary champion. The judges confronted Israel's foes. They were defenders of the people.

Samson is perhaps the most famous of the judges. He's known for his super human strength, a fact that scripture attributes his status as a nazirite. A nazirite was someone set aside as a dedicated offering to God. As long as a Nazirite seeks to consecrate his life to God, he would not cut his hair. In Samson's story, his hair is linked to his willingness to dedicate himself to the Lord. The Lord is pleased by the idea of Samson's dedication, thus Samson is rewarded with strength to defend himself and the Jewish people.

And he certainly does a good job of defending himself. In fact, over the course of the four chapters that describe his life, Samson engages in fight after fight with the Philistines, Israel's rival, killing up to 30 of them by himself at one time. The Philistines are portrayed as a foreign people with a foreign culture, residing in close proximity to the Jewish people. They were Gentiles, like the Canaanite woman Jesus originally dismissed in our gospel. Samson hated them and they hated him.

And yet, in an interesting turn of events, Samson meets Delilah, who is herself a Philistine. Our text tells us that he fell in love with her. Notice the text never says she loved him. We are told that Philistine lords, sought Delilah's help in defeating Samson. She obliged by learning the secret of Samson's strength. Despite how she is often portrayed, Delilah does not deceive Samson to gain this secret. She asks him directly what she wants to know. Samson is the one who deceives her. Three times he lies to her concerning the source of his strength. But in the end, he reveals his secret and the Philistines capture Samson, taking him prisoner.

For this text's Jewish audience, this is a sad turn of events for Samson, their hero. And that is how we, who inherit this story, often view it. We are conditioned to feel sympathy towards Samson, the Jewish hero. But I invite us to step out of our preconceived understanding of this story and to consider this passage from the perspective of the Philistines. From their point of view, this is a great story! The horrendous strong man who wreaked terror on their people, killing hordes of them at a time, was finally captured, thus ending years of horror. From the Philistine perspective, Samson received his comeuppance and Delilah, far from being a femme fatale, is a hero who partners with the lords of her people to bring down a national threat.

It's all about perspective. And there's always more to a story than our perspective of it. It's important to remember that the texts we receive hold certain biases. An African proverb states that, "Until the lions have their own historians, tales of the hunt will always glorify the hunter." Perspective is everything. How and what we are conditioned to believe impacts our understanding of the world.

For Jesus, in the story of his encounter with the Canaanite woman, his conditioning limited his grasp of God's grace. The story of Delilah and Samson shows us that there's more than one side to a story. Both of these scripture passages remind us that our personal perspective is often limited.

And my friends, God calls us to more. God calls us to broaden our perspectives. God calls us to seek differing perspectives. In Paul's letter to the Christian community in Corinth, he writes, "when I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways." When we value our perspective, our understanding, above all others we act immaturely and God calls us beyond that.

God calls us to recognize that God is at work in other people's lives. We can learn from even those we would consider enemies. God calls us to learn, even as Jesus did, that despite the boundaries we seek to build, God's grace knows no bounds. Seek new perspectives. Be open to God's presence on the other side of the story. Leave room for alternative interpretations. Recognize that your way is not the only way. Listen to others. Leave space for God to work. You may be surprised at what happens. Amen.