



# Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins  
Rector

## Heart

### **Sermon for Lent 5, March 26, 2017**

*Readings:* 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41; Psalm 23

*Sermon text:* The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart. 1 Samuel 16:

We cannot as God did look directly on David's heart and see why he, youngest of eight brothers, just a boy, a shepherd, was nevertheless chosen to be king. But people's lives reveal their character (heart), both strengths and weaknesses, and David's life as narrated in 1 and 2 Samuel is quite revealing in this respect.

David had the heart of a warrior. Courage in abundance. Armed with only a sling-shot and five smooth stones—and trust in God—the boy David struck down the mighty Goliath, a seven-foot armored killing machine who terrified everyone in the army of the Israelites. As a man, he led both a small band of renegades and a large army to victories over his enemies, establishing the kingdom of Israel against its external enemies and building the new capital at Jerusalem.

David had a shepherd's heart; he used his prowess to defend those in his charge. As a boy he led the family flock to pasture and water and defended against them against wild animals. In the idle hours of watching them graze, he perfected his sling shot technique; legend says he killed a lion (so that is why he felt confident against Goliath).

But he was far from perfect. He succumbed to lust in his affair with Bathsheba; he committed a mortal sin when he used his royal power to have her husband killed. But David repented after being confronted with his sins by the prophet Nathan, he prayed for his sick child, and he had a poet's heart: Tradition credits him with composition of many of the psalms, including the 23rd psalm we read this morning, so beloved by every generation. "The LORD is my shepherd..."

He was a "man in full," to use a phrase of the novelist Tom Wolfe.

Character—heart—still counts today. Courage is always needed—for without the courage to act, virtue is only wishful thinking. But we need more than courage. We need wisdom (prudence, self-control) and endurance, both to flourish in the world and in our journey toward God following the Way of Jesus.

Thomas Edsell wrote an op-ed in last week's *NY Times* in which he cites a paper<sup>1</sup> by Richard Reeves and his colleagues in which they argue that drive and prudence, two “performance character strengths,” appear to be especially important for individual academic and economic success. What do they mean by drive and prudence?

*Drive* is an orientation toward *task* completion: “People with drive are able to stick with a task, even when it gets boring or difficult; they work hard and don't leave a job unfinished. Drive includes not just the ability to work hard (industriousness) but also the ability to overcome setbacks and to keep going (resilience).”

*Prudence* is a positive orientation toward *time*: “Prudent people are able to defer gratification and plan for the future; they can make sacrifices today in order to ensure a better tomorrow. The better developed a person's character strength of prudence, the less they suffer from what economists call ‘present bias,’ the tendency to under-weight future utility. They can both plan for the future and exert self-control in the moment to reach their long-term goals.”

There are other names for these character strengths such as grit, resilience, and self-control. The point is to note that these are not so much innate traits nor simply acquired skills. To call them character *strengths* implies the possibility of improving over time and exercise; a key to upward mobility.

Drive and prudence are well known in scripture, though with different names. In the New Testament, drive or grit goes by the name of *endurance* (*hupomone*), while prudence is a combination of *practical wisdom* (*sophrosyne*) and *self-control* (*enkrateia*).

Endurance can be developed, and sometimes suffering is the way we develop it. But if we trust in God's promises we can even “boast in our suffering,” as St Paul wrote. “For suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Romans 5:2-4).

What a wonderful thing, the gift of the Holy Spirit; it is the great theological virtue of faith. It leads to all sorts of good things, “fruit of the Spirit,” as Paul puts it in another letter: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

Quite a contrast to what Paul calls “the acts of the flesh”: “sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like” (Gal 5:19-20).

---

<sup>1</sup>[“The Character Factor: Measures and Impact of Drive and Prudence,”](#) Richard Reeves, Kimberly Howard and Joanna Venator, 2014, Brookings Institute

Let's take a couple of these bad boys and translate them into today's terms: factions: political polarization, and drunkenness: addiction.

Peter Beinart writes in the April 2017 issue of *The Atlantic* magazine that declining church attendance may be causally correlated with increasing political polarization. He writes: "when cultural conservatives disengage from organized religion, they tend to redraw the boundaries of identity, de-emphasizing morality and religion and emphasizing race and nation....The alt-right is ultra-conservatism for a more secular age. Its leaders like Christendom, an old-fashioned word for the West. But they're suspicious of Christianity itself, because it crosses boundaries of blood and soil."

Liberals are also at risk: "White Democrats who are disconnected from organized religion are substantially more likely than other white Democrats to call the American dream a myth...The decline of traditional religious authority is contributing to a more revolutionary mood within black politics as well."

His summary point: "Maybe it's the values of hierarchy, authority, and tradition that churches instill. Maybe religion builds habits and networks that help people better weather national traumas, and thus retain their faith that the system works. For whatever reason, secularization isn't easing political conflict. It's making American politics even more convulsive and zero-sum."

Maybe church attendance helps but I think "religiosity" (the sociologists' term for attending church regularly) is less important than having faith, for faith helps provide a sense of purpose, awareness of our dependence on a "higher power," hope and love of neighbor. We may learn about these in church, but we need them in our heart.

Without a sense of meaning and purpose, we drift and are prey to addiction. A recent article in *First Things* magazine by Christopher Caldwell, "American Carnage," surveys the new and terrible landscape of opioid addiction. The article goes into some detail about the history of the epidemic—how changing attitudes toward pain medication, abetted by the pharmacological industry, has flooded the market with opioid painkillers. These are often put to other uses—getting high. Craving for that high—which increased tolerance makes elusive—leads to addiction. Addicts find cheaper more accessible alternatives in street heroin, which in truth is more often fentanyl, a synthesized opioid manufactured in places like China and shipped through many borders. It is more powerful than heroin and is deadly in small amounts—hence the increase in overdose deaths.

Caldwell also reflects on how the medical treatment of addiction—and generally calling addiction a disease— is useful for some parts of addiction, particularly tolerance and withdrawal, but "as an overall approach, it partakes of some of the same fallacies as its supposed opposite, 'heartless' incarceration." The fallacy is to forget there is a dimension of moral responsibility, a ground of spiritual combat, in addiction. "Addicts, in their own short-circuited, reductive and destructive way, are armed with a sense of purpose"

The search for a high is a search. In order to deter addiction—or rather the careless hedonism and excessive risk-taking that often lead to addiction in our society— people need a more compelling vision of life than as a daily grind and then you die. Where is the hero's journey, the quest? What can appeal to the hero's warrior heart that we saw in David—what can help our young people avoid this destructive act of the flesh?

Let us return to the deep wisdom and high aspirations of our tradition. Scripture tells us that God has given each one of us gifts (traits, skills, strengths) to be used for the common good, for building up the body of Christ and serving his mission in the world (Ephesians 4). Let's hold up the idea of our God-given calling, coupled with a high ideal of service. It's an old idea (Calvin in particular taught it) but it helped settle this country. It serves as a leaven to mere self-interest, which comes to us naturally but leaves us hungry for a higher purpose. How about this one, from the Baptismal Covenant: "strive for justice and peace and respect the dignity of every human being," and all living beings (BCP 305). Or this one, from the writer Wendell Berry: "Practice resurrection."<sup>2</sup>

And we also know sometimes we need to screw up our courage in order to follow our call and manifest our gifts. Let us challenge ourselves, and especially our young people, to take heart, have courage, and face the challenges of life heroically. Paul calls this putting on the armor of God (somehow martial images are connected at an archetypal level). "Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." (Ephesians 5:14-17).

Or maybe just pick up five smooth stones, along with faith in the promise and power of God.

But put the work and training in. Develop your gifts into true strengths through disciplined practice. Heed the exhortation found in the first letter of Peter: "You must make every effort to support your faith with goodness, and goodness with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with endurance, and endurance with godliness, and godliness with mutual affection, and mutual affection with love. For if these things are yours and are increasing among you, they keep you from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:3-8).

In Christ's name, Amen.

The Rev, Dr. Matthew Calkins, Rector  
Grace Church, Millbrook, NY

---

<sup>2</sup> Wendell Berry, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front"; 1991  
<http://www.context.org/iclib/ic30/berry/>