

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 6, Year B (track one)

First Reading

1 Samuel 15:34–16:13

Then Samuel went to Ramah, and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul. And Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD regretted that he had made Saul king over Israel.

The LORD said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go. I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.” And Samuel said, “How can I go? If Saul hears it, he will kill me.” And the LORD said, “Take a heifer with you and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.’ And invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do. And you shall anoint for me him whom I declare to you.” Samuel did what the LORD commanded and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling and said, “Do you come peaceably?” And he said, “Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves, and come with me to the sacrifice.” And he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely the LORD’s anointed is before him.” But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.” Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “Neither has the LORD chosen this one.” And Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. And Samuel said to Jesse, “The LORD has not chosen these.” Then Samuel said to Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” And he said, “There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and get him, for we will not sit down till he comes here.” And he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome. And the LORD said, “Arise, anoint him, for this is he.” Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers. And the Spirit of the LORD rushed upon David from that day forward. And Samuel rose up and went to Ramah. (ESV)

Second Reading

2 Corinthians 5:6-10,*[11-13]*,14-17 (optional verses in italics)

So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Mark 4:26–34

And he said, “The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground. He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come.”

And he said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown on the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth, yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants and puts out large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

The text appointed for this week from 1 Samuel benefits (or suffers?) from some context. The verse that comes immediately before our first verse is:

1 Samuel 15:33

And Samuel said, "As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be childless among women." And Samuel hacked Agag to pieces before the LORD in Gilgal. (ESV)

The rejection of Saul that we read in v. 34 and following results from Saul's failure to utterly eradicate Agag and all of the Amalekites and their possessions. YHWH had ordered that *all* be destroyed, put to the sword, but Saul spared Agag and his family, and kept as spoil the best of the sheep and the cattle. One of the more blood-thirsty passages in the Bible.

So Saul is rejected as king over Israel and Samuel is sent to anoint another, and our text this week begins the story of David, "a man after His (YHWH's) own heart." (1 Samuel 13:14) It is tempting to keep looking back to God's command to destroy utterly everyone and everything Amalekite and sympathize with Saul for having spared even a few, but I think that gives Saul too much credit here. He only spared the royal family, those like himself, and took some spoil. There was no compassion for the child of the ordinary Amalekite.

But our reading is not about the Amalekites, so a discussion of what we do with those blood-soaked verses will have to wait for another day. (Much as they trouble me.)

It surprised me this week to find that, beginning in about 1980, a near consensus had arisen that challenged what had been the traditional understanding of the phrase "after His (YHWH's) own heart" when applied to David. Beginning with a commentary published in 1980, scholars had fairly unanimously suggested that "after His own heart" did *not* refer to David's heart, but to YHWH's choosing. "After His own heart" meant "after YHWH's own choosing."

Apparently (I know very little about Hebrew) the grammar of that phrase is indeed ambiguous. "After one's own heart" *can* mean according to one's own choosing, and it clearly does mean that elsewhere in the Bible. But not everywhere. It is also clearly a reference to the heart of the one whose heart is "like" the heart of the other. So choosing which way to understand the phrase in 1 Sam 13:14 must then fall to context.

I read our text appointed for this week and I'm thinking, "How in the world did these commentators choose "after YHWH's own choosing" in light of God's looking on the heart of David as *the* means of deciding whom to anoint as king?" And yet, somehow, they did. There are other, more complex grammatical and structural arguments from 1 Sam 13 that would also support understanding 13:14 as referring to David's heart being after YHWH's, but I find our text for this week all the confirmation I need. I don't know if that "consensus" has since collapsed, but I hope so.

So God has had David in mind since chapter 13, and because of his heart.

I do find it amusing that, while God is careful to tell Samuel not to judge by the outward appearances of Eli's sons, the author of 1 Samuel nonetheless makes a point of telling us how "ruddy" and "handsome" David is. Apparently, even then, it was great to have the right heart, but it didn't hurt to have the looks, too.

Okay, on to the

Second Reading

Doing some study for our second reading this week, I came across a couple interesting articles that cast new light on this section of 2 Corinthians for me. As I've said before, commentators on 2 Corinthians generally agree that the early chapters of this letter comprise Paul's "defense" of his apostleship. That makes sense to me. I think that the minority of scholars that sees Paul's opponents as essentially Jewish proselytizers are probably right, but that figures little into this week's reading.

What I discovered this week was another question to ask of the text, one that I hadn't thought of before. Once we've agreed that Paul is defending his apostolic status against a group here, the next question should be, "Why?" Yes, of course, the simple answer to that is, "He's being attacked by those "super apostles," but the better answer would tell us, "What does he hope to accomplish with this defense?" What is Paul's larger purpose?

Our reading this week contributes a good deal to that discussion of we read it with Paul's real goals in mind. What *was* his larger goal? The two articles I found this week that address this question describe this purpose as "missional." That is, Paul continues to hold his desire to see the Corinthians become sharers of the Gospel to the world as he has been to them. This reality becomes even more important when it helps us read 5:21. "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Unfortunately, our readings skip that verse between this

week and next, but it's one I'll try to deal with because it lies at the heart of so much atonement theology.

I am oversimplifying it, in part because I don't grasp all the details of it, and in part because it's just beyond the scope of this Divergence, but keeping Paul's missional goals in view seems to add so much to the way we read his letters.

So, on to our text for this week.

Paul has, in previous chapters, explained why his hardships and frailties are marks of the truth of his apostleship, claiming as strengths that which is opponents would claim as weaknesses. Then he continues, "So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight." Again he contrasts what is visible, his weakness, with what is true, his strength in the Lord.

A couple of verses later, we come to one that some (myself included) may find troubling.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

Most of us on Sunday morning will hear a different translation, it will read, "For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil."

I find that a somewhat preferable translation, as "recompense" carries with it fewer overtones of potential punishment than "what is due," at least to me. In either case, the verb there basically means to receive, and to receive that which is owed. And we will receive what we are owed for "what has been done in the body." That preposition, translated "in" here, "*dia*" can mean a lot of other things. It's tempting to stick with "in" because Paul has just been talking about being "in" the body and "out of" the body, but here he uses a different preposition, *dia*, instead of *en*.

That makes me want to look more deeply, and another way of translating this is, "...what has been done *on account of* the body," or "...*for the sake of* the body."

I'm going out on a shaky limb here, because no one that I've ever read has said this, but I think that Paul may have changed metaphors here. "The body" may no longer refer to our mortal bodies, but to the Body of Christ. It's difficult, because of Paul's talk about bodies just a few verses ago, but the change in preposition and my new-found appreciation for Paul's missional emphasis both lead me to think that the repayment he

anticipates will be related to what he has done for the Body. I think that this may even cause me to read “body” in the earlier verses more ambivalently.

If in fact Paul is concerned with what he has done *for the sake of* the Body, then the following verse make greater sense:

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you.

For the sake of (failed) brevity, I’ll skip down a few verses, beyond our reading for this week.

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Paul continues here to speak of himself. Yes, he believes that those who take up Christ will be similarly transformed, but he hasn’t really finished his explanation of his apostleship. Above, Paul spoke of himself in the second person plural. We need to read the second person plural as first person here, too. He speaks of himself, and indirectly, the Corinthians here. He has been made an ambassador for Christ. He speaks with God’s voice, and he can do this why? Because God has made Jesus to be sin who knew no sin so that we/he (Paul) might become the righteousness of God.

This is not Paul’s atonement theory. (Thank you, N. T. Wright.) This is Paul describing himself as an extension (ambassador) of God’s *covenant righteousness*, that is God’s continuing saving work. What God did in Jesus did not change my nature, but changed my purpose, made me a part of the working out of God’s *covenant righteousness*.

This will be an unpopular reading of 2 Cor. 5:21, especially among those who (like me) have taken this to be Paul’s description of some kind of ontological exchange between Jesus and myself. But this reading is truer to Paul’s larger purposes, it keeps this reading from taking on meaning that is foreign to its context, and it calls each of us to

our own roles as ministers of reconciliation, as extensions of God's (covenant) righteousness.

Boy, I hope I haven't made a mash of that. Oh, and here's a link to N. T. Wright's paper from 1993.

Gospel Text

The two parables that make up our reading for this Sunday conclude a series of parables that begin with the Parable of the Sower and Jesus' explanation of the purpose of parables. What I did not realize until this week is that, like the smaller chiasmic unit in chapters 2 and 3, Mark has used another such concentric structure to shape the parables of chapter 4. Several attempts have been made to figure out which pieces of the chapter fit where. The one I found most convincing is one proposed by Greg Fay in 1989. [Here's a link to the article](#). (Remember, you can view these articles at JSTOR.com by creating a free account.)

In his article he sees the concentric structure this way.

A vv 1-2a	Introduction
B vv 2b-9	Parable Material
C vv 10-13	Parabolic Method
D vv 14-20	Interpretation of the Sower
C' vv 21-25	Parabolic Method
B' vv 26-32	Parable Material
A' vv 33-34	Conclusion²²

The center of any such structure provides the key to understanding its purpose and meaning, so Fay has determined that Jesus' interpretation of the Parable of the Sower and the disciples' incomprehension is the interpretive key.

For the sake of our readings for this week, I'll try to keep that key in mind. But our two parables for this Sunday are both about seeds that grow of themselves, parallels to the seeds of the Sower earlier in the chapter.

In the case of the first parable, the seed produces fruit that is gathered by "the sickle" when the harvest comes. I think that commentators tend to overlook the eschatological weight of that phrase when reading this parable. Jesus here echoes Joel 3:13. The word for sickle in Mark is the same as that in Joel in the Septuagint, *drepanon*.

Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the winepress is full. The vats overflow, for their evil is great.

Obviously, the harvest is a Kingdom harvest, not the harvest of wrath that Joel envisions, but this reversal doesn't change the eschatological impact of the phrase. Instead, I think that this reversal is part of Mark's depiction of the disciples' misunderstanding. Yes, the center of our chiasm speaks to their incomprehension, but it concludes with, "With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it. He did not speak to them without a parable, but privately to his own disciples he explained everything." Going back to Jesus' explanation of the Sower, those who cling to Joel's vision of horror will be like the seed that first sprouts and then withers due to persecution and tribulation. They fail to see the harvest for what it is. Yes, there's a sickle, but it's a harvest of the fruit of the Kingdom.

Jesus continues with the parable of the mustard seed. We need be careful here not to mix the two similes. There is faith like a mustard seed, and there is the Kingdom that is like a mustard seed. This is the latter. It has nothing to do with our faith, but rather, speaks of the inevitability of the growth of the Kingdom, from something tiny and easily overlooked to something enormous and sheltering.

My take on this is that the Gospel, this seed of the Kingdom, is irresistible. That is, it gradually breaks down the structures of this world that are based in violence and victimization, showing them for what they are. Of course, these same power structures have tried to tame the Gospel, make it a servant of their designs on empire, but the reconciliation that shines from the Cross is like the lamp from earlier in chapter 4. Sooner or later everything is exposed by its light.

This is why I am not too awfully dismayed by the rise of christian nationalism. (I refuse to capitalize "christian" when it is linked to "nationalism.") I see in it the death throes of the perversion of Christianity that began centuries ago with Constantine. Real Christianity, that which sets people free and lifts up the lowly will continue to chip away at the foundations of every culture that is built on the death of the scapegoat. Which is probably why authoritarian governments hate it so. It is, like the mustard seed, something that grows of itself, and will eventually provide shade and shelter for us all.