

The Law of the Last, the Least and the Lost

(1 Samuel 16: 1-13; 1 Corinthians 1: 26-31; Psalm 8; Mark 4: 26-34)

I have a gift for you this morning. It's an extremely valuable tool for biblical interpretation. It can save you from hours of wandering through poor interpretations based on wrong assumptions. It can give you a reliable *short cut* to the heart of the matter, and it can do that in the Old Testament or New, in Psalms or Prophets, Gospels or Epistles, in Hebrew, Greek or English. The gift is this: if you see "small" in the text, think *big*; if you see a line-up from first to last, think *backward*; and if you see a cause that seems hopelessly *lost*, start celebrating the *win!* Some know this as "the Law of the Last, the Least and the Lost". A handy short form, even easier to remember is, the "La-la-la Law"

Did you notice that all four of our Scripture lessons are playing the very same tune this morning, giving us a rich 4-part harmony rendition of one of the Bible's greatest melodies. The *tune* that's playing has to do with *how* and *who* God *picks* for his purposes, and how God's viewpoint on humanity is definitely *not* like *humanity's* viewpoint on humanity. It has to do with how God isn't afraid to reverse the normal order of things, turning all our expectations right upside-down if that's what it takes.

The first voice in the 4-part choir this morning is that of the old prophet Samuel. He's just been given a task by God, to go pick a new king for Israel, which is a little delicate since Israel still *has* a king at the moment, who is very much alive and not in a particularly good mood. Samuel is directed to Jesse's house, where his sons are lined up in order, from biggest-oldest to smallest-youngest. Now Samuel is secretly wishing that the picking would happen near the front of the order, where the lads are bigger, tougher and more adept in the art of mortal combat—which is what may be needed when King Saul gets wind of what's going on here.

Needless to say, the *obvious* choices are all missed. In fact, it looks like they have run right out of choices, until some wiseacre suggests with tongue in cheek they could go get the runt of the litter, who is so thoroughly improbable that they deliberately left him out tending the sheep. Despite the shock and disbelief of all present, including Samuel, *that's* the one! No doubt about it! God apparently, and his people should know this by now, has a soft spot for the *runt*. He has a penchant for picking the least probable. What's possible for God extends well past our "impossible." That's just God's nature. It's part of the deal between God and us—part of the covenant relationship that God gets to pick 'em as *he* sees 'em. The same God who picks Abraham and Sarah—candidates for great-grandparents at least—to become real parents of the whole nation; the same God who picks a runt-in-a-basket called Moses to beat

up on the whole Egyptian empire; that same God is probably going to pick a little shepherd boy to be king. We shouldn't be surprised. And besides, it makes a great story!

The second voice we heard was that of Paul, and he's telling his people to think carefully and honestly about what *they* were like when God picked *them*. Now, let me fill in a little background on the fellow who's writing this. Paul felt, and he expressed this a couple of times in his letters, that he was the very least among all those other "apostles". He was the one to whom the Risen Christ appeared *last* of all, he hadn't had the same hands-on kind of training that the others did, and he considered himself the runt of all the apostles. "One abnormally born" is how Paul phrased it, which in *Greek* is how you can say "the runt of the litter". Last in the order, lowest in importance, the very least likely and least probable as a mouthpiece for Christ. But in spite of it all, he *was* picked. Paul suggests that his people ought to think of themselves in similar terms, neither beating themselves down nor inflating their own egos, but humbly considering themselves as runts in faith, in eloquence and influence. Remember where you *came* from. Remember what you were like when *God* picked you—and not too many *others would* have!

There's a delightful third voice from the Psalms this morning. Psalm 8 lays out this wild, glaring contrast between the God who creates the heavens and earth, and these "mere humans" who hardly deserve his attention but receive it nonetheless. The Hebrew word that gives the sense of "mere" as in mere humans, or "puny" or "insignificant", that same word can also be used, in the *barnyard* context, and there it designates the *runt* of a litter—the least viable one, the one that probably won't make it on its own, the one that needs all the help it can get. *That* small, that insignificant, that *unlikely!* And that's the one God *does* take notice of, that's the one he "remembers" like he remembers his covenant. There's another dimension to the same contrast when it's the splendour and majesty of the whole Creation that's counterbalanced by the praise that flows from the lips of children and even *infants*. The tiniest little runts still have a *huge place* in God's heart. And frankly, when it comes to the sound of praise, I think God much prefers *infant* praise to all our grown-up, adult, long-faced stuff.

The fourth voice in our Gospel choir is that of Jesus, and this, I imagine, is a rich tenor voice that makes all the difference between a nice bit of harmony and a thrilling performance that resonates right up and down your spine. Jesus is giving some deep thought-provoking word-pictures for the "Kingdom of God", focusing especially on how the Kingdom grows from an insignificantly small speck, and how it grows in a fashion that makes no sense at all to us. But grow, it does. As tiny, dried-up and lifeless as that little seed may appear to us, there's *life*

in there that even our best modern science can barely conceive or explain, and that life in the seed is going to nourish us—it's going to influence our living and it's going to provide, in turn, for *our* growing.

Jesus loved that stuff about insignificantly small beginnings and imperceptibly mysterious growth, because that really is the life of faith, isn't it? It's not the ideas or the attitudes that we deem important or impressive that bring faith to life, nor can we explain how faith can develop from a vague feeling into a whole way of being, into a way of relating to other people in a helpful, trustworthy, affirming manner. And you see, the other thing about the life of faith is that it's not something that we *choose* to do or that we ever *attain* by our own efforts, it really is a matter of *being chosen*, being *picked* by God, against all odds and probabilities. In real faith, it's *God* who makes the *first* move, and we make a response, whether positive or negative, affirming or denying. Faith is *being called*, and *knowing* that you've been called, into a loving relationship by Christ; called into a personal covenant by the almighty Creator. It's being called into a promise that we just don't deserve. I can't explain that. I doubt that you can either. In one sense, it doesn't make any sense. On the other hand, it doesn't need to.

When God is doing the picking, it doesn't *have* to make sense to us. When God does the picking, well, it's not like we used to encounter on the hockey rinks of our childhood, when the kids would line up to pick teams and always there would be at least one—invariably the smallest or least skilled—that *no one* wanted to pick. And the ones doing the picking would sometimes offer that kid *free* to the *other* team, sometimes even seeming to take the kid's feelings into account: "Take him! You don't want him to feel bad, do you?" And the reply would come flying back, "Then *you* take him, if you're so nice!" When God is doing the picking, the one nobody wants is going to get moved up to the front of the line.

Age, size, physical strength, social status—none of these make any difference to God when he's doing the picking. Abraham and Sarah were frankly quite ancient already when the suggestion was planted that they could get frisky again. That laughter Sarah was famous for, may have had a few more dimensions to it! At the other end of the age spectrum, Timothy, the young protégé of Paul, was probably only about 26 years old when he found himself the senior staff person in possibly the largest church of the whole province. "Don't let anyone look down on you just because you're young," was Paul's advice, or was that maybe a command?

Age isn't related to important achievements or natural greatness. Maturity, yes. Attitude, absolutely. Skill and intelligence, yes of course. But not *age*. Benjamin Franklin was 84 when he arranged and led the convention that went to work on the Constitution of the

United States. And about the time Franklin was doing that, little Wolfie Mozart was composing piano and violin pieces at age five. Sensational golf prodigy, Michelle Wie, turned professional at age fifteen, around the same time that a dear friend of mine, Norm Blanchard, in his nineties, was making his seventh hole-in-one. Does age matter? You tell me.

We're not too young to do something significant. And we're never too old, either. Nor can we be *too small*, for that matter. Queen Victoria, ruler of a vast empire, was maybe 5 feet tall (if they put blocks and pads in her shoes!); St Francis of Assisi was 5'1 (no wonder the animals liked him—he was right down at their level!). Paul the Apostle was about the size and shape of a fire hydrant, if 2nd century descriptions can be trusted—and *if* they can, then there's one more reason why Paul may have thought of himself as the runt of the litter.

We may, on occasion, seem like or look like—perhaps even *act* like—a very unlikely pick for *any* team or for any kind of *greatness*, but when God's doing the picking, watch out! Everything changes. Everything, and *everyone*.

Can I give you a new “out-of-the-box” definition for Church? Church is a place way where we can really celebrate the fact that *everybody—absolutely everybody belongs* here, has equal status and gifts, is equally *loved* by God, *picked* by Christ and *powered* by the Holy Spirit!” From the very youngest to the eldest, from least to greatest, from smallest to largest, there's no distinction. No group has the edge over another. But if I were a *betting* man, I'd say, “Keep your eye on the runt! Don't ever underestimate them. In our outfit, they're virtually guaranteed to make the biggest move in the shortest time!”

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