

We Never Know Better than God

It may not be obvious why the lectionary pairs today's readings from the Hebrew Scriptures and Mark's Gospel. To connect them, let's start with 1 Samuel. Last week, we saw Samuel as a boy, learning from his mentor, Eli, how to speak with Adonai. Today, we've skipped over his decades of faithful service. Samuel is old and, like Eli, has mistakenly appointed his corrupt sons to succeed him. The elders demand that, instead, Samuel give them a king.

Samuel was the last of the *shoftim* (שופטים). We translate *shoftim* as "judges," but the meaning is closer to "rulers." The *shoftim* were leaders selected by Adonai to deliver his chosen people from their enemies and bring them back to him when they lapsed into pagan worship. The *shoftim* weren't kings; until this moment, Adonai was the king of Israel. That's why he tells Samuel, "they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them." Samuel warns the elders that a human king will take the best of everything from the people, including Adonai's portion, but they refuse to listen. They want a king so Israel can be just like every other nation. That's how they end up with poor Saul.

When Adonai chooses Saul to be Israel's first king, the people are thrilled. Saul looks like a king, handsome and very tall. He's physically strong and quick to fight anyone who challenges his authority or threatens his people. But Saul turns out to be kind of clueless. He doesn't understand his spiritual responsibilities, he prioritizes secular practicalities over God's wishes, and he suffers from bouts of rage and depression. In other words, he's a human king, just what the people wanted although they already had a king above all others in Adonai.

Fast forward to Mark's Gospel. The people, eager for miracles, are mobbing Jesus. His mother and brothers arrive, wanting to restrain Jesus based on rumors that he's lost his mind. The Temple scribes accuse Jesus of accomplishing his miracles by demonic means. Everyone has an

agenda, an opinion or both, and no one is bothering to ask Jesus what *he* thinks he's doing. That he manages to make the points he does here may be a miracle in and of itself.

That's the connection I see between these two passages. Whether it's the elders rejecting Adonai in favor of a flawed human king, the crowd demanding endless miracles, Jesus's family striving to control him, or the scribes pushing their ugly interpretation of Jesus's healing powers, everyone thinks they know better than God. Admittedly, this scene takes place relatively early in Jesus's ministry, and he's told his disciples and the people he has helped not to identify him as the Messiah. Just a couple of chapters back, though, Jesus exorcised many demons, at least one of which called him "the Holy One of God" in front of a synagogue full of witnesses. Even if the scribes were too stiff-necked to admit that he might be exactly that, his family must have had some idea. I'm not criticizing Mary. She had ample reason to fear that being the Holy One of God wouldn't keep her boy safe from violence inflicted by human hands. She probably wanted to protect him – that's what mothers do. But it seems to me that it would have been better for the other people in both of these passages to take a breath, say a prayer, and consider what God's plan might be before trying to ram through one of their own.

In our secular, postmodern and media-driven society, there is no shortage of opinions. If, by some circumstance, you don't have your mind fully made up about anything under the sun, battalions of self-declared experts will be more than happy to tell you what to think. They're also more than happy to tell you how you should vote, what you should look like, how you should manage your money and time, and especially what you should buy. If those "experts" ever stop to wonder what God might say about any of that, I haven't seen much evidence of it. There are celebrity preachers who quote Scripture at length, but too often they also threaten you with damnation if you don't accept their dogma or donate to their ministries. They, like the marketers

posing as pundits, play on your desires, insecurities, and anger to persuade you that they know what's best for you. And that creates a couple of problems.

First, Jesus was spot on when he told the scribes that a house divided against itself cannot stand. Whether it's a family, a business, a church, a neighborhood, or a nation, no human institution can thrive if its members are divided. There should always be room for differences of opinion and healthy discussion, but those things need to occur in the context of a shared commitment to doing what's best for everyone and serving the common good. And while it's not a terrible thing to want your group to do well, it's important not to let devotion to your people curdle into hatred toward someone else. This may sound corny, but God's laws, be they the Great Commandment to love God with all your heart, mind and strength and love your neighbors as yourself or the Ten Commandments, offer a solid foundation for community life. Throw in the rule about forgiving seventy times seven, and you have enough to prevent the divisions that tear communities apart. And I believe Jesus wants us to hold together. He could just have pointed to the results of his work when the scribes accused him of demonism; he didn't have to give them a discourse on division. That he did tells me he wanted them, and us, to recognize and avoid the harm that follows when we decide that we're always right and others are always wrong.

That leads to the second problem that arises when we think we know better than God. If divisions are bad, slavish conformity to other people's ways can be even worse. Adolescents are legendary for wanting to be just like their friends, but we're all vulnerable to believing that if we don't look, dress, talk, live, and love just like the people around us, they'll condemn us. When we encounter someone who's different, we may try to change or ostracize them. But the more we force people into conformity, the greater the risk that we'll extinguish the unique loveliness that is their God-given birthright. Our Creator doesn't work with cookie cutters. Every human being

is a handcrafted masterpiece. If there's something we don't like about ourselves or someone else – and there too often is – maybe it's because we don't understand God's plan. We all have unique gifts. They shouldn't sit idle or, worse, be destroyed because they don't fit neatly into our own or someone else's expectations about what a person "should be."

When the elders demanded a king, they devalued Israel's greatest treasure: their unique status as Adonai's chosen people. The system Adonai had put into place wasn't working, but that's because their leaders weren't properly choosing their successors. *Shoftim* were supposed to be chosen for their integrity and wisdom; nepotism wasn't in the plan. Instead of trying to replace God, the elders would have been wiser to prayerfully consider how they could better execute God's plan. Anyone can make that mistake, so the lesson for us in this passage is, I think, to discern what God is doing in our lives before we start trying to "fix" things that may be necessary if we're all going to grow into the people God intends us to be.

That leads to the one sin that Jesus says can never be forgiven. I struggle with the idea of any sin being unforgivable, but there's no denying that some sins have dire consequences. So, what does it mean to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit? The consensus among Bible scholars seems to be that it's being so certain of your own perfect righteousness that you can look at the Spirit's lifegiving work in the world and have the unmitigated gall to call it demonic. It's the arrogance that insists it knows better than anyone, even God. If you're worried about whether you've blasphemed against the Spirit, don't – your anxiety proves you're not that far gone. But it wouldn't be a bad idea to say a humble prayer now and then for those who are. There's too much division in this world, fostered by prideful people who are all too sure they know what's best. We never know better than God. My prayer is that we'll accept that, and that we'll always remember to seek out and draw upon his gracious wisdom before we act on our own. *Amen.*