

David Prepares to Meet Goliath
ala Perry Gaither
I Samuel 17:31-40
April 26, 2010

Introduction

The scene is that of David's audience with King Saul. Remember the story as given to us in I Samuel. David is the fourth and youngest son of Jesse. His older brothers are part of Saul's army to drive out the Philistines. But they are at a stalemate. The Philistines have a giant Goliath who every day comes out and taunts the Israelite army so much as saying send our a champion and whoever wins this contest wins the war. But the Israelites cower before the nine foot giant.

Now Jesse has sent his young son David to provide food and refreshment for his sons and their commander. Eager to see the action, David readily complies. And not there long hears of the dismal turn of events and how badly things are going for the Israelites. David's brother give him a hard time as he inquires about this sad situation---"You are here just to watch the action, you impudent rascal!" David demurs, "I'm only asking a question". But word gets to the king who summons young David.

Out of nowhere David in this command audience tells the king, "Do not lose heart, sir. I will go and fight this Philistine."

"You cannot go and fight this Philistine; you are only a lad, and he has been fighting man all his life."

David's forceful reply: "Sir, I am my father's shepherd; when a lion or bear comes and carries off a sheep from the flock, I go after it and attack it and rescue the victim from its jaws.... Lions I have killed and bears and this uncircumcised Philistine will fare no better than they.. The Lord who saved me from the lion and the bear will save me from this Philistine".

Then with the King's blessing, Saul clothed the young shepherd with his own regal tunic, helmet, mail of armor, and girded him with his own sword.

David dutifully stood there, but obviously uncomfortable with the King's garb, he replied respectfully. "I cannot go with these, because I have not tried them".

Then he picked up his tried and true weapons—his stones and a stick—puts them in his shepherd's bag and went off to meet and vanquish the giant. The rest is history.

Every preacher has his sermon ready to preach at a moment's notice. David and Goliath has always been my stand by. My children used to moan whenever accompanying me to preach; "Daddy are you going to preach that David and Goliath sermon again?" Well, you have to admit it has great potential with all kinds of themes and issues from sibling rivalry to intergenerational conflict. But as I thought about this challenge to preach to this special assembly it occurred to me for the first time the immense influence of the Scouting experience generally and Perry Gaither in particular.

We can hardly be here assembled today—those of us whose tenure reaches back to the mid-50s—without thinking of our departed friend and revered mentor Perry Gaither. I was fortunate enough to share cabin two with him all four summers I was on the staff. Though barely two years my senior, in my memory he was part of that magic circle of those who led and helped shape this place into a life changing experience for countless boys. So I really think of Perry's telling this message and in his own way embodying much of the message in the way he lived out his life.

Perry was an extraordinary individual. He combined the keenest qualities of those his senior (such as Louis Pritchett, Roy Riddick, and George Billingsly) but he added his own wrinkle with his distinctive funniness and his contrarian intellectual spin on most any topic. The image of him as the iconic waterfront man-- shirtless (except at meals), sun glasses, and when not working reading a paperback by Mailer, Faulkner or James Joyce. He could morph from insane silliness to dead set seriousness in a second. A guy always full of surprises who masked his deep seated care of human beings with a nonchalant demeanor. Whose real character seeped out with that familiar chant—"Save the world for the boy".

It has only recently occurred to me that Perry influenced me in a very profound way shaping that lens of mind and voice through every sermon I preached or prayer I prayed. And the topic is so Perry—dealing with the melding of the wisdom of the sage and the energy and spirit of the young.

And so this message I shared countless times was shaped by Perry and his many associates here in these very hills in formal settings around campfires or serious discussions late into the evening in the Thunderbird's Nest or in our cabins.

Lesson One

The first lesson we get from this story is, in contrast to the usual youthful impertinence we expect from the saucy youngster, is respect for one's elders. In this almost comical scene, the impatient King has young David try on his heavy armor and his royal tunic.

We should note the King's good sense of humor in this situation. He is open to God's working in unusual ways—maybe God indeed has sent this young shepherd as his secret weapon against the Philistines. So the King gives the young lad the best he has—his tunic and armor.

The scene is almost comical. It reminds me of when our son was just six years old and we were visiting his uncle my older brother—a flight officer and co-pilot in a fighter jet during the Vietnam War. Eddie was idolized by our son and nothing would do but for him to try on his uncle's flight helmet and jacket. I remember the scene vividly. The jacket swallowed him. And when Greg turned his head, the helmet remained stationary.

There is a seasoning of age and experience that the daring young should not ignore as they go up against the Goliaths that may intimidate their elders.

As the philosopher George Santayana has said:

“Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

David's passion and zeal did not impel him to rush off disrespectful of the King's counsel.

The lesson we glean is that of respect and civility to our elders and those who have gone before and made their best efforts—even when they have failed. We ignore the wisdom and experience of our elders at our dire peril.

Lesson Two

The second lesson that is conveyed from this event tells us, aside from the genius of young David himself, the power and import of youthful impertinence. When young David arrived, the armies of Saul had been engaged in an impasse for some time against the Philistines—Saul and his lieutenants obviously looking for some face saving exit strategy.

Young David, who had survived in the wilderness against fierce beasts, counting on God to sustain him, could not believe that the mighty army of King Saul was stymied facing the Philistines. And he as much said so when he got to the front and heard of the predicament.

It's the not unfamiliar questions from youth;
 “Why accept war and poverty?”
 “How can we tolerate disease and hunger?”

As some of you know I am somewhat of an American History buff. Try to read everything I can get my hands on, especially about the American Revolution and our founding fathers—without a doubt the greatest generation. One of their number often overlooked for me is that romantic figure the Marquis DeLafayette. Among the contributions of this young upstart (age 19 when enlisted as General in Continental Army) are not only his military and diplomatic exploits; but as well his spiritual and moral contributions. As a dedicated Freemason he was absolutely committed to the idea of emancipation of all slaves. He was persistent in making that point to his commander in chief and good friend George Washington. And it was no doubt his singular arguments and example (he purchase an entire plantation in French Guyana to free and educate slaves) as much as anything else that prompted George Washington to make provisions for the freeing of all his slaves at his death. And thus set the moral bench mark for the next half century as to the absolute necessity of dealing with this intractable evil.

Many a wise and older man argued that slavery was a problem without practical solution. Young LaFayette made an invigorating example that impressed President Washington—who in turn set an example for later generations.

God's gift to us often comes in the form of the young—impertinent and idealistic.

Conclusion

There is the lesson for us here too. We who have benefited from the counsel young and old of all who have gone before us and shared these sacred hills and waters. We have been given a holy mission to the young to carry the torch for a better world, a more just society, and an earth that is sustainable. Thanks be to God for his servants such as Perry Gaither, Doris Goodman, George Billingsly, Ralph Young, Pete Peters.

God give us all the wisdom to meet the challenges like both Saul and David. Eager to respond as God gives us vision and inspiration, yet civil and respectful for all that has gone before us. In such a way the Kingdom comes among us.

Fred Morton
Bartlett UMC

This message inspired in preaching class by colleague Tom Long and used periodically in my ministry on numerous occasions in NC. Whitehaven, Ky and at St. Luke's UMC.

Only recently have I appreciated the influences of many mentors in Scouting during the days of my youth in Arkansas in the Foothills of the Ozarks above the waters of the South Fork.