

**“Checking Our Loyalty” based on 1 Samuel 8:4-9 (10-18) and Mark 3:20-35**  
**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on June 9, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

There’s an old story of a farmer who was down on his luck wandering far from home. He came upon a woman who gave him a task that she said would change his fortune. She sent him to cut down a tree, a particular tree, deep in the forest.

So, the farmer cut down the tree and as it toppled over, two eggs fell to the ground. Each one cracked open and out of one came a baby eagle. Out of the other egg fell a single, plain, gold ring. The eagle magically grew to full size in a few moments, and then it spoke to the farmer, thanking him for setting him free.

The eagle said the ring would grant one wish, if it were turned twice before making a wish. The eagle warned him that the ring could be used only once, and after the wish were made, it would be forever after just a single, plain, gold ring – without any magic.

Excited, the farmer headed for home and came upon a small village where he would spend the night. In the village was a jeweler, so the farmer took the ring to him, wanting it to be appraised, to know its value apart from its magic. The jeweler said it was a nice ring, quality gold, but nothing special beyond that. Excited about the promise made with the ring, the farmer told the jeweler about the eagle.

Later that night, as the farmer slept, the jeweler took the ring, replacing it with an identical one from his stock. The farmer did not notice anything and went off to his farm to tell his wife. The jeweler went into his office, locked the door, and pulled out the ring. He turned it twice on his finger and wished for 1 million gold coins. Just moments later, he heard a clink, as a coin landed. It had fallen from the ceiling on the table next to him. Then another fell, and he started dancing. Soon the trickle became a downpour, and before he could escape the jeweler was crushed by the coins.

This tale is a reminder of an old adage, “Be careful what you wish for. You just might get it.” Our text today is a turning point in the history of God’s people. The 12 tribes have been living in the promised land, divided among them, and have gotten into a cycle. They turn away from God, then find themselves facing defeat at the hands of an enemy. After they repent, God sends a deliverer to save them. This brings peace to the land, until they sin again, turning away from God, over and over again.

In the midst of this violence and disorder, God always raised a leader when needed. Eventually, this leads to Samuel taking over as priest, prophet, and military leader. Each tribe is independent, but when the Philistines come to attack, it is Samuel who rallies the people together and wins victories to protect them. Now, Samuel is old, and the people don’t want a leader as needed. They want a leader on demand at all times – they want a King. They want what Egypt had, what the Philistines have, what the Canaanites had – a full blown monarchy.

Indeed, God’s chosen people who were called to be set apart or different from the nations around them, are now begging to have a king like everyone else. They’re begging to be just like the other nations. Samuel has been at the helm for many victories, but his sons are not ready. Samuel tries to appoint them to be leaders, but in doing so, he is himself acting like a king. He’s trying to hand down his role. That’s why Samuel’s offense is not the “other nations” part, No, it’s that they’re

asking for a different king altogether. What is wrong with him and his kids, he wonders. He takes it personally.

God sees it differently. God tells Samuel that this has nothing to do with him as the leader. For God, this is the same cycle as before, with the people rejecting God as their king. Instead of saying “no” to their plea, God tells Samuel to listen to them, but to warn them – Be careful what you wish for – because a human king will not be the wonderful utopia you think it will be. Kings are subject to corruption, to greed, and to creating bondage.

We might think we are better off today. After all, we live in a democracy without a king. How great that is. But in truth, we vest our leaders with the same expectations the people of Israel did. We think that if this candidate wins, it will make us great! Or that we need the other candidate to win in order to save democracy! Or perhaps it’s a party to stand up to this agenda or another one as the chosen leaders who will stem the tide of evil once and for all! Or perhaps a party is needed to finally take control and tear down all the systems of oppression, again, once and for all!

This is what the world has been selling even since the days of the tower of Babel. The desire of the people then was to build a single city, with a tower reaching heaven, so that they might make a name for themselves. They sought a single identity and conformity. There is power in this – the creation of a name under which to unite – means you can get people to do what you want them to do. And so, the story tells us God diffuses this power from the outset. God scatters the people and confuses their languages. Rather than allowing humanity to be all the same, God accentuated the diversity of the world.

Now Israel in our scripture is desiring the same wish as those building the tower of Babel. They want a king of their own, a single name or identity, to rule over them and fight their battles for them. This is the warning Samuel gives in verses 11 to 18 (NRSV):

*“This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some, he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants.*

*“He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you’ll cry out for relief from the king you’ve chosen, but the Lord will not answer you in that day.”*

After hearing all of that, the people responded, *“We want a King over us. Then we will be like the other nations, with a king to lead us and go out before us and fight our battles.”* And so, Samuel went to the Lord with their response, to which the Lord answered, *“Listen to them and give them a king.”*

Despite hearing that families would be conscripted into standing armies. Despite hearing they would be used as agents of an economic machine meant to sustain these armies and the rulers. The people look out at the world around them and rather than being different they decide they want to be just like everyone else. It doesn’t work out well. King after king after king fails in the sight of the

Lord. Even the best king, David, and his successor Solomon, had their issues. Solomon was the offspring of a relationship David started after killing a man to take his wife. They fit what is predicted.

Yet, despite knowing this history and the honesty of scripture in telling the history, when Jesus arrives on the scene the expectation of many, if not most, was for a Messiah, a Christ, an anointed king to lead the people and go out before them and fight their battles, overthrowing Roman rule, and its yoke of oppression. This is the tendency we still grapple with today and have long struggled with in the church for at least 1,700 years of our nearly 2,000-year history.

Despite centering our faith on the Son of God entering our humanity, to humbly bear our human flesh, we struggle with the feeling of vulnerability in a hostile world. Yet this is who the Christ is. Our anointed King submitted to human limits. We want power as an end, yet the one who held all power, became obedient, even to the point of a shameful death. He was raised up on a Roman cross, which he called his throne. We fear being shamed and death. Yet by his shame and his death, the power of sin and death and shame have all been defeated to give us new life right now and in the age to come.

Our gospel reading is from just the third chapter of Mark and already Jesus is scaring people. But why are they scared? Why did those close to him want to seize him because he was out of his mind? Why did the scribes come from Jerusalem and accuse him of being possessed?

Up to this point, Mark's gospel has announced Jesus, shown his baptism, and described him being filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit leads him out in the wilderness to be tested. Then he calls disciples, exorcizes demons, and heals some people. He forgives sins, welcomes the outcast, heals some more people, and then proclaims his divinity in interesting ways.

Ok, apart from this last one about his divinity, there's nothing here that seems like something to be upset about. After all, he passes the tests. He makes friends. He relieves those afflicted by demons. He heals illnesses. He shows love to people on the margins – even sinners. But in truth, all of these things worry them because they do reveal a divine nature or authority, and that is their main concern – by what authority is he doing what he's doing.

That's why the scribes accuse him of being possessed by Beelzebul, which is a name for the rival Canaanite god, whose name the Israelites have changed. His worshipers called him by a name that means, "Lord of the House." The Israelites tweaked a letter or two to make him, "Lord of the Flies," as in the Lord over dung and excrement. So, the argument is that he is possessed by this false god and not the Holy Spirit.

This is why Jesus warns them because what he is doing is good, restoring relationship with God. Therefore, to say that he is possessed by Beelzebul, or by Satan, is a different type of blasphemy. It's not against him, but the Holy Spirit, from which they will not find forgiveness. Instead, Jesus is binding Satan, the strong man, and plundering his house. Jesus says that he cannot be of Satan, since a house divided, is not able to stand. Remember earlier we talked about the power of unity and the Tower of Babel story and the desire to have a single king to rule.

The point here is not that government is bad, or unity is bad, or anything like that. The point is that there is only one true point of unity. That is the sovereign rule of God over us. This is the point

Jesus makes when they tell him that his family has come, and it seems they want to take him away from this place. Now, perhaps it's because they too don't approve of what he is doing and they believe he has gone mad. Perhaps they are worried because they are worried he will not be safe. But Jesus here expands his family dynamic. Whoever does the will of God is my brother, is my sister, and is my mother, he says.

Beloved, in the story of the farmer, he never finds out about the jeweler having switched and used his ring. Instead, he and his wife think they have one wish, and first they want to wish for a field adjoining theirs. It would be good to have the field. But they think this is too small a wish, so they work hard and they buy the field. Time and time again, they come up with more ideas and decide it is in reach, so they save the wish for something bigger. They work hard and die as successful farmers, having never used the ring.

We need to be careful what we wish for and how we characterize our vision for the world. You see, God's desire is not uniformity. God's desire is not the power and control that comes with making people the same. Instead, God's desire is for unity in diversity united in doing the will of God. That's what we see at Pentecost when Babel is reversed, and everyone hears in their own language. It's not that they understand the same language, but they hear in their own.

Likewise, in the vision of Jerusalem coming down from heaven, all nations go to the heavenly city. It's not that they become one nation, but all go. This is the unity in diversity that God desires. God loves each and every one of you for who you are. You are not like the person next to you. You might be similar in some ways, but you are not the same.

Your neighbor may disagree with you, be it on a favorite color, a theological point, or who the next leader should be. That person is not your enemy, but your sister or brother seeking the will of God with you, even though you're different. We can obtain the power of unity without it being a power over one another. Instead, the power of this unity is a power that brings restoration and reconciliation to a broken world.

The desire to have a king was a quick fix. We are always tempted for quick fixes. It's why we think our vote or support will fix the world. It's important to vote and get involved, but do not think that your virtue comes from that thing you posted on Facebook, or that vote you made, or another accomplishment you think you have obtained. None of that will bring about the second coming.

What Jesus wants from us is allegiance, loyalty, and love. What faith means is trust, allegiance, and loyalty. What love means is the self-giving love that Jesus embodies for us. What God wants is for us to recognize this in the revelation of Jesus, who didn't have to, but still did bear our flesh to die for us and rise for us. We are empowered by the Holy Spirit to seek the will of God as siblings in Christ so the Spirit bears fruit.

Remember the fruits: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Notice that none of these fruits are hate, anger, violence, getting our way now, superficiality, evil, infidelity, demanding our way, or controlling others. None of the fruits are a quick fix. The fruits are how we present ourselves as Christ's siblings and reveal the love God has for us. We reveal this love then to those who might not yet know how much God loves them. Amen.