

“The Stories We Tell”
1 Samuel 18:1-9
Pride Sunday
June 25, 2023
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Introduction

The stories we tell are important. They help form who we are and help us learn right from wrong. Stories can help us work through problems, perhaps help us know that we are not the only person who has dealt with a particular issue. That I am not the only one. There are others like me and always have been. But sometimes the stories we tell are part of the problem. They justify behavior that should be repugnant. They reinforce harmful stereotypes and prop up the toxic patriarchy that has ruled our race for far too long. They prolong beliefs such as might makes right, that God is on OUR side, and only OUR side, that ends justify means. To begin this sermon we are going to tell the story of David and Jonathan, which does pretty much all of the above.

Story of David and Jonathan

Our story begins a little before our text for the day. David, a ruddy youth with bright eyes and handsome to behold, is the youngest of Jesse’s sons and cares for the sheep. One day he goes to see his brothers who are soldiers for King Saul. The Philistine giant Goliath is taunting the Israelites, and no one dares go out and fight him. David is incensed by it all, and charges Goliath equipped only with a sling and some stones. He knocks Goliath out with a stone to the forehead, and then cuts the giant’s head off with Goliath’s own sword. David takes the head with him to Jerusalem.

Details of the events that follow are a bit muddled, but David somehow ends up before King Saul and his son, Jonathan. It is not clear whether he is still toting an extra-large severed head, but if he is that doesn’t distract Jonathan from gazing into David’s bright eyes. And now we come to the text for today, 1 Samuel 18.1-9 from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition:

18 After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself. ² From that day Saul kept David with him and did not let him return home to his family. ³ And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. ⁴ Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt.

⁵ Whatever mission Saul sent him on, David was so successful that Saul gave him a high rank in the army. This pleased all the troops, and Saul’s officers as well.

⁶ When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with timbrels and lyres. ⁷ As they danced, they sang:

“Saul has slain his thousands,
and David his tens of thousands.”

⁸ Saul was very angry; this refrain displeased him greatly. “They have credited David with tens of thousands,” he thought, “but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?” ⁹ And from that time on Saul kept a close eye on David.

That’s the end of today’s scripture, but not the end of our story. Saul sends David out on various errands, such as collecting 100 Philistine foreskins, but gets more and more angry and afraid. There are marriages, and attempted murders. Saul throws his spear at several people, including David and Jonathan, but always misses. David ends up on the run for his life, and passes on two chances to kill the king. Everybody loots everybody else at every chance. David finally takes up with the Philistine king for protection. Even though he is working for the Philistine king, David raids Philistine villages, but he and his men cleverly kill all the inhabitants so there are no witnesses. The looting and massacres go on for chapters and chapters.

Finally we get to the book of II Samuel. Saul and Jonathan are killed in battle, and David sings a lament. In II Samuel 1.26-27 he sings:

²⁶ I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother;
you were very dear to me.
Your love for me was wonderful,
more wonderful than that of women.

²⁷ “How the mighty have fallen!
The weapons of war have perished!”

Now don’t get the idea that David gave up on women, or on war for that matter. He had eight wives, including Bathsheba who he raped and had her husband killed in battle, and about 18 children.

The books of Samuel tell a very convoluted story of David, and other books in the Hebrew scriptures tell their own variations of the tale. In addition to being a warrior, he is recalled as a musician and poet. The myth of King David grows from these and other stories. He even makes an appearance in the Quran. Early Christians link David to Jesus, and today Evangelicals use David to justify Donald Trump’s behavior. King David has grown into a legend on the order of King Arthur, and not a particularly nice legend at that. Some contemporary scholars call him a tyrant. One refers to David as a serial killer. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David>)

We need new stories

So why take the time to share a story like this one? Because stories are powerful. Cultural Anthropologist Michael Margolis puts it this way: “The stories we tell literally make the world. If you want to change the world, you need to change your story. This truth applies both to individuals and institutions.”

Hear this again: “If you want to change the world, you need to change your story.”

(<https://www.inc.com/dave-kerpen/you-need-to-become-a-better-storyteller-heres-some-inspiration.html>)

Stories have a power that other means of communication lack, and that’s why I believe it is time for us to start telling different stories. New stories.

When I started working on this sermon I googled the phrase “we need new stories.” That is how I discovered the book, *We Need New Stories: The Myths That Subvert Freedom*, by Nesrine Malik (W.W. Norton and Company). The author was born and raised in Sudan. He grew up hearing stories from his grandmother, including one about the origins of their family. In the story, the family was very rich and had an ancestral home so large that if you poured a cup of tea while at one end of the house the tea would be cool by the time you walked to the other. In his teenage years Malik first saw the real ancestral home, which was a couple of mud huts. There was no family treasure. At first he was angry with his grandmother, but then he realized that the story was her way of coping. I quote:

“She had spun and then believed her own inventions because she needed to. Her stature, severely diminished by her husband’s untimely death and his poor economic planning, meant that at the age of 25 she was an impoverished widow with 5 children. The stories had to be woven to sustain her, to create a cushion on which to land as her real status plummeted.”

But the stories had other effects. Family members felt entitled, even though they had no actual wealth. Quoting again:

“Blinded by entitlement, we never questioned ourselves. Even as we gradually succumbed to bankruptcy, eviction, and public humiliation, the family remained pugnacious and scornful of others.”

As a young man Malik “escaped” to the United Kingdom. His family was furious, and he finally cut off contact with them. He built careers in finance and in the news media. Eventually he wrote his book about the myths that delude western society. Quoting again:

“Here were all the myths again, telling us that the West in general, and Anglo-Americanism in particular – was special, imbued with some essential virtue, and entitled to success and dominion over others, expecting them as some kind of birthright.”

Malik presents six myths, including *The Myth of the Reliable Narrator* and *The Myth of Gender Equality*. We will leave that material for another time.

Let's tell some new stories

So you may be asking, "What does any of this have to do with Pride Sunday?" Great question.

When I agreed to preach on Pride Sunday I was assigned the II Samuel text about Jonathon loving David. As is my way, I began by reading not only the assigned passage but the texts before and after it. The more I read, the more horrified I became. Ultimately I didn't care if the story was about Pride or not. I found it sickening, and I decided we need to tell some other stories, some new stories to celebrate LGBTQIA+ Pride.

Back to Google I went and discovered *The Book of Pride: LGBTQ Heroes Who Changed the World* by Mason Funk (HarperOne Publishers). The book is part of a project called OUTWORDS, whose goal is to capture the story of Queer History while some of the pioneers of that effort are still alive. You can find the project at <https://theoutwordsarchive.org/>. The stories I found there are truly inspiring.

Stories like that of Troy Perry, ordained a Southern Baptist preacher at 15, married at 18 to fix his sexuality, divorced, and suicidal. In 1968 he founded the Metropolitan Community Church, often known as the "gay church," in his apartment in Los Angeles. Today MCC has churches in 20 countries on every inhabited continent.

And stories of lawyers and judges such as Phyllis Randolph Frye. Named Phillip at birth, she became a lawyer after transitioning and launched a transgender law practice and eventually the International Conference on Transgender Law and Employment Policy. In 2010 Houston mayor Annise Parker appointed Phyllis to the municipal bench, making her the country's first openly transgender judge. Transgender attorney Shannon Minter called Phyllis "the grandmother of our movement."

The book tells the stories of bar and nightclub owners, who fought off hostile police departments and angry mobs to provide LGBTQ folk a safe place to gather. Others including Jewel Thais-Williams broke the race and culture barriers intrinsic in the early gay community itself and provided spaces that welcomed everyone regardless of how they looked or dressed.

Some of us are familiar with the story of Grethe Cammermeyer, nurse and Army colonel, who challenged her involuntary discharge and won. She served at Fort Lewis, south of Tacoma, and currently lives on Whidbey Island with her wife.

And on Pride Sunday, let's remember people like Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, an African-American transgender woman who was on the front lines of the Stonewall Riot on June 28, 1969.

Can you feel the Pride in these stories?

And there's more. We have stories to be proud of in our own church.

Some of us remember Dr. Walt Pulliam, a longtime member of SFBC. While on staff here in the 1960s Walt hosted a support group for Gay men. Few people in the church knew about it at the time. You may not remember Walt, but many of you have seen his doctoral robe. Dr. Tim Phillips inherited it and wore it here for years.

Dr. Rodney Romney, who came to SFBC in 1980, raised the issue of homosexuality nearly every Sunday for more than 20 years and led this church to become a charter member of the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists. Rod preached acceptance of LGBTQ people so much that even some LGBTQ people got tired of hearing it. And some, me included, never tired of it.

In the 1980s and 90s SFBC had an AIDS Task Force that worked with other nonprofits to serve those impacted by HIV. Since 1994 SFBC has employed at least 4 LGBTQIA pastors, including Tim Phillips, and ordained pastors that many other American Baptist Churches still refuse to ordain. In 2012 our church came together to host a wedding for 25 same-sex couples when, thanks to Washington State voters, that became legal.

Can you feel the Pride yet?

I know many people here have their own stories to tell about Pride. I want to share two.

The first story comes from Cherry Johnson. In the late 1970s she chaired the Church Council of Greater Seattle's Task Force on Lesbians and Gay Men. One thing the group did was give birth to a Seattle chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). In 1979, members of PFLAG participated in their first Seattle Pride March – note it was not a parade in those days. Cherry remembers marching past huge signs that told her she was going to hell, and hearing people heckling loudly, even violently.

The march ended in Pioneer Square, where there was a rally, and the PFLAG group started working the crowd. The fledgling group consisted of a retired Methodist minister and his wife who ran a little book business, a therapist who was the mother of a gay son and a lesbian daughter, and the grandmother of a young gay man. They had printed some little brochures to hand out. Cherry watched as they passed out these brochures and offered hugs to the mostly young gay crowd – almost all of whom were alienated from their families. The brochures were folded white pieces of paper. On the outside in black print they said "What Did Jesus Say About Homosexuality?" The minute most marchers saw this they were repulsed. Some shouted at the little group, who just let them be angry. But a few risked opening the brochures, where they were surprised to find a blank page.

What did Jesus have to say about homosexuality? Absolutely nothing. The theological lesson might not have impacted many people that day, but Cherry was changed by witnessing these allies offer love in the face of all that pain. And they did it everywhere they could year after year.

THAT’S what Jesus had to say about homosexuality!

As a note PFLAG met at SFBC for years before COVID. Although their meetings are mostly online now, they still have a presence here.

Can you feel the Pride yet?

Finally I want to share my own Pride story. In June 1987 I was a young, inexperienced pastor at a Metropolitan Community Church near San Francisco, and we were invited to participate with other MCC churches in that year’s Pride march. As was tradition, the march began with the Dykes on Bikes, more than 100 powerful women on nearly-as-powerful motorcycles. And right behind them the organizers placed us, a bunch of queer Christians. AIDS had already killed so many people by then. Everyone in the LGBTQ community knew someone who’d died, and others who soon would, and we in MCC comforted the sick and memorialized the dead. Our group held hands and sang hymns through the entire parade route, and we were met with cheers and tears and hugs from the people lining the sidewalks. I don’t recall any hateful protesters – perhaps our Sisters on Cycles scared them away!

After the march we hosted a memorial service for those who had died from AIDS. We met in a huge church downtown, and the place was packed. I led a litany of remembrance, and I will never forget the candle-lit faces of so many who came forward to honor their friends and family. We all washed the floor with our tears.

And that’s how all Christians, all peoples, SHOULD have responded to AIDS!

Can you feel the Pride yet?

Conclusion

There are so many more Pride stories worth telling. For a start just ask the same-sex couples in our midst who have been together 10, 20, even 50 years! But for the sake of wrapping up this sermon I guess we should turn back to David and Jonathan. Were they lovers? Or did they just have a sort of covenantal bromance? Frankly I don’t care. They lived in a world that I am happy to have missed, and their stories are full of murder and rape and endless warfare. Myths like the ones about King David have been used to justify horrific behavior for centuries. I say, let’s leave David and Jonathan back where they belong, and let’s focus on telling new stories. Stories of hope, of courage wrapped in kindness, of the Infinite Love that knits the universe together.

To riff on an old hymn:

*I love to tell New stories
They’ll be my theme in glory
I’ll tell some new, Queer stories
Of Jesus and Queer Love.*

Happy Pride!

Benediction

And now my Sisters and Brothers and Non-binary Siblings,
Go forth in Strength.
Go forth in Hope.
And go forth in Pride.
For I am convinced that neither death nor life,
Neither angels nor demons,
Neither the present nor the future,
Neither heights nor depths,
Neither Christian Nationalists nor neo-Nazis,
Neither Rights-grabbing State Legislatures nor people too busy to care,
Neither Clarence Thomas nor Ron DeSantis,
Nor anything or anyone else in the Cosmos
Will ever separate us, and I mean ALL of us, from the Love of God
That comes to us in the Christ,
That was demonstrated to us by Jesus.
Go now in Pride, and as always,
Go in Peace, and Go in Love.