

The Leader Board – Rev. Dr. Nancy Cocks

Texts | Samuel 15.35 – 16.13; Mark 4.30-33

Every day throughout the pandemic we've seen leaders on our screens. I'll bet we all recognize most provincial premiers now in a way we haven't for years! So I had leaders on the brain when I looked back at 1 Samuel. The story begins two chapters earlier with the failure of King Saul. God had not been in favour of kings for Israel to begin with. God had Samuel warn the people about the trouble with kings - but they insisted they needed a royal leader. Turns out that Saul lived down to God's low expectations of kings. Samuel was a bit more sympathetic until Saul took over Samuel's priestly role for himself. Samuel's grief & disappointment set the stage for today's story when Samuel agrees with God to anoint a new king.

There's a warning in our story about how we pick our leaders. As the sons of Jesse appear, Samuel is impressed by outward markers – height, stature, who's handsome and well built? So God warns Samuel not to be taken in by appearances – yet the storyteller keeps tweaking our preference for a nice looking guy, introducing David as handsome with beautiful eyes! But we should not be taken in. The undertone throughout the Books of Samuel is a warning about leaders and their failings. Whether it's King Saul or King David or a long list of others, every Biblical "hero" eventually falls short. Though celebrated for uniting the tribes of Israel, David had deep moral flaws, took bad military advice, and failed to lead his family well and wisely. God's people would not find all that their community needed in one heroic figure. Truly, I'm thinking the daily pandemic parade of premiers has shown us this truth again. A community always needs more than a single hero.

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We can recognize this reminder in Jesus' parable, too. We usually think of the parable of the mustard seed as a truth about small seeds growing to impressive results, an image about how God's power grows the kingdom on earth. But this week I thought about all those birds nesting in the branches of this huge and hospitable bush. And I thought about all the different species of birds God has placed in creation, each splendid in its own way for colour or song or persistence; each with its own role in maintaining the balance of creation by whatever it eats or wherever it spreads seed or sound. This week the parable of the mustard seed speaks to me of the place God has provided for everything with its own gift, contributing to the beauty and wonder of God's kingdom.

Together, these two Scriptures reminded me of a book I'm reading called *The Code Breaker*. (by Walter Isaacson © Simon & Shuster 2021) It's a biography tracing the community of scientists whose discoveries over the last four decades have contributed to the development of the mRNA vaccines – Pfizer and Moderna, those lifelines in the midst of this pandemic. Yes, there is one leader who is the focus of the story – Jennifer Doudna who with a female colleague won the Nobel Prize in 2020 for their groundbreaking work in biochemistry. But it's not just about her. What impressed me is how her leadership in the field of RNA has had to be collaborative.

She was inspired as a ten year old by her observations in nature – how a peculiar kind of leaf curled up when she touched it. Her parents and teachers offered her early encouragement to pursue her curiosity

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about how life works. Her journey of discovery after discovery is populated with others - professors who saw her potential and encouraged her; then as a professor herself, the students she invited into her lab and gave crucial pieces of the puzzle to solve; then colleagues all over the world whose expertise dovetails with hers, forming partnerships to keep expanding the science and its medical potential together. Yes, there's competition, especially among universities, for funding and patents. There are some not particularly heroic moments when collaborative colleagues compete for dollars and recognition. Sort of like King David's story. But this book opens on March 13, 2020, when Dowdna realized the seriousness of the coronavirus pandemic and called together a huge mustard tree network of colleagues who could contribute to the development of both tests and vaccines. She knew whom to call on for which kinds of expertise. And she did, gathering friends and competitors alike, to make their contributions on a spectacularly effective timeline.

From the mustard seed of a 10 year old girl's curiosity over a certain kind of fascinating leaf, has grown this huge tree of scientific collaboration with world healing potential. If that isn't a sign of God's kingdom at work in the world, then I don't know what is!

At its best, the Church is this kind of mustard seed project, an adventure in hospitable collaboration where each bird finds a home and an opportunity to add its gift to God's purposes at work in the world. June always reminds me of St John's anniversary as a church, starting out when MH was just a tent city, when a gathering place which might have been a bar on weeknights became a worship space on Sundays.

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Our mustard seed congregation has deep roots in this place. Just looking at the stained glass windows and the photos in and around the Heritage Room reminds us of so many lives which found spiritual shelter here. St John's has flourished the most when people of many different backgrounds and interests were made welcome and then given the chance to offer their skill or gift or energy to common projects worthy of God's kingdom.

We're birds of many different feathers in some ways – each with different songs to sing, colours to flash, nests to build and grubs to catch. Yet in another way, we find unity in God's purposes – drawn to scripture, prayer and study, exploring so many ways to love our neighbours, all from the seed of the Spirit planted in our baptisms. As the pandemic begins to lift, we birds of Presbyterian feathers need to flock together again, migrating back from months of isolation to offer to God our unique contributions in loving service and – soon, I hope – to join our voices again in joyous songs of praise. For if there is one thing this bird is looking forward to, it is a hymn sing to lift the rafters – and maybe even the new roof – with some joyful sounds of praise!

Amen. May it be so.