

“A Peculiar People”
1 Samuel 8, 10:17-25

One So I will admit to not being much of a hockey fan. I can only recall attending two NHL games, and, having lived in Michigan for twelve years, they were both Detroit Red Wings games.

Even as a non-hockey fan, one of those games was a particularly memorable experience. The Joe Louis Arena was still the home of the Red Wings, and I was there with my friends Jess, Matt, and Ben. The Red Wings were playing the Chicago Blackhawks. And I didn't know a lot about hockey, but I knew the Red Wings and the Blackhawks had a significant rivalry. Any time these two teams are in an arena together, it's going to be an intense game, and they'll be watched by an intense crowd.

So there we were, sitting way up in the top of the seats, surrounded by increasingly drunk Red Wings fans. Matt and Jess were from Detroit, so that's naturally who we were cheering for. Ben, who grew up in Hamilton, was even wearing a Red Wings jersey. And things were going well for us – Detroit had scored a goal and was ahead in the game.

But then Chicago scored a goal. And then another goal. And soon they held a substantial lead over Detroit. And at some point during this reversal of fortunes, Ben stood up and took off his Red Wings jersey to reveal... a Blackhawks jersey.

I have never been so convinced that I was actually about to die.

The crowd around us started yelling and booing and throwing half-drunk cups of beer in our direction. An older, less-inebriated man in front of us turned around and said, “That's a bad idea, son.”

The crowd eventually calmed down and turned their attention back to the game, but I have never wanted to hide under a bleacher so badly.

With that black jersey in a sea of red and white, we stood out like a sore thumb. We were the odd ones out. “This thing is not like the others.” And standing out did not bode well for us.

In general, we don’t like to stand out. We don’t want to be peculiar. We want to fit in, to belong, to fly under the radar, to not ruffle feathers. We want to be liked, respected, approved of. We all have our quirks, the things that make us different, but then we find other people with similar quirks with whom we can fit in, joining clubs and sports teams and musical ensembles. Here, with these people, we won’t stand out.

Not standing out is exactly what Israel is after in today’s text. It’s time for a leadership changeover, and they’ve got some new ideas. Ever since Israel’s inception at Sinai, she’s been a theocracy. The people have lived in a covenant relationship with Yahweh, lived according to the promises and commands of God, which were mediated to the people through prophets, priests, and judges. In last week’s story, God raised up a new leader for the people, transitioning the power from Eli to Samuel.

Only now Samuel is an old man. And in a rather ironic turn, he’s in the same boat Eli was in. His sons are no good schemers. They take bribes, handing out justice to the highest bidders. So the people, understandably, don’t want the mantle to pass from Samuel to his sons.

But instead of turning to God in this moment of uncertainty, the elders come up with their own plan. They’ve looked around – at Egypt, at Moab, at Philistia – at all these mighty nations around them, nations that are currently breathing down their neck – and have recognized that all these nations have something Israel does not: a king. So, they conclude, if we’re going to compete, if we’re going to become as great a nation as Egypt, if we’re going to repel the Philistine army that’s even

now on our doorstep, we need to do as they do. We need a king, a ruler, someone to centralize power, someone to lead us, someone to raise up an army.

So this is what they ask of Samuel. “Give us a king!” they clamour. Samuel gets all in a huff at his family being cast aside, but God reminds him that it’s God the people are rejecting, not Samuel. As the people have done time and time again, they’re forsaking Yahweh and going after other gods, going after what seems more reasonable, more palatable, more normal, more tangible. Walter Brueggemann writes,

Two “Israel’s early tradition affirmed that Israel had a peculiar relation with Yahweh, the God of the covenant. Therefore Israel was to practice a peculiar form of social and political power. This peculiar relation with Yahweh and the peculiar form of social power derived from the relation proved to be a costly embarrassment to Israel. Israel is regularly restless with its demanding peculiarity. In its restlessness, Israel began to see ways to be less peculiar and more “like the nations.”

Israel didn’t want to be peculiar.

And neither, it seems, does the church.

The church has always wrestled with the question of how to exist in the world, of what its role is, how we are to *be* with and within the larger culture and society. Ever since the time of Constantine, we’ve struggled with the relationship between the Church and the State, wondering how we can and should influence power and decision-makers without ourselves being influenced by the desire and temptation to be the powerful decision-makers.

Today, in a post-Christian Canada, where Christianity is viewed with more antagonism than ever before, a big question we’re asking is, “How do we make Christianity appealing and compelling to people?”

On Pentecost I talked about the workshop I attended where we acknowledged the Church is in a wilderness season. One of the pieces of data we looked at was this graph. **Three** 1700 people were asked, “In your view, would you say the overall presence of each of these religious groups in Canadian public life is benefiting or damaging Canada and Canadian society?” The percentages show the net result of those who said “benefiting” minus those who said “damaging.”

So if you look at Evangelical Christianity, the net result amongst Evangelicals is a 68% positivity rate. But if you look at how those who claim no religion rated Evangelicals, it’s a -46% disapproval rate. Protestants on the whole have a -15% disapproval rate amongst non-believers.

We stand out...and not in a good way. And as the church loses its influence and instead faces increased scrutiny, there are two patterns we tend to fall into.

Four The first temptation is to try and make church more accessible, more palatable, less weird. We water down our theology, we do away with some of our stranger rituals and practices, we make church as easy to get to as just clicking a button on your laptop.

The emphasis for churches who follow this pattern tends to be around building a better society, and so they align themselves with broader social justice movements. The fundamental purpose of the church, they argue, is to promote peace and justice in society, and so if you are also doing that, you can find a place with us, even if you don’t necessarily buy in to what the church has historically taught about sin, salvation, the resurrection, the divinity of Jesus, etc. John Howard Yoder, a 20th century American Mennonite theologian, describes this as the “activist church.”

On the other hand, the church might be tempted to confront this growing hostility and lack of influence by retreating and drawing up the walls. They look at the social optimism of secular society with raised eyebrows, arguing that no amount of tinkering with structures and systems will change anything unless there is also personal change of heart and reconciliation with God. So they pull inward, focusing on the individual soul and the demands of piety, often at the expense of providing an alternative social ethic to the larger world. Yoder calls this the “conversionist church.”

And you can see how the activist church might be broadly aligned with liberal politics, and the conversionist church with conservative politics. In both cases, the church ends up supporting social or political ideas that come from without. Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon, in their book *Resident Aliens*, argues that the church has too often been a “dull exponent of conventional secular political ideas with a vaguely religious tint.” We have given up our peculiarity in order to be palatable.

What’s fascinating about Israel’s retreat from peculiarity is that God lets them do it. We’d expect God to tell Samuel, “You just go tell that wayward people that theocracy is the deal and they have to stick to it.” But he doesn’t. He tells Samuel to find them a king.

God’s not on board with the idea, of course. There is a wistfulness, a sadness, as he gives the people permission to do what they want. And he does tell them, through Samuel, that this alignment with the way of the world is going to have consequences. Lest Israel forget her time in Egypt, God reminds the people that kings tend to abuse power. Those who are given total rule will do anything to maintain their rule.

And indeed – Israel will spend the next five centuries under the rule of kings who go from bad to worse. Far from becoming a strong and

mighty nation, Israel will be torn in two, and first Judah, then Israel, will be taken into captivity and made subservient to a foreign king.

And yet.

And yet...even as the people stray from God, God is working out his plan of salvation. God knows that from this line of kings will come the one true King. God will use Israel's misguided desire to bring a wayward people home again.

So Zechariah prophesies to a people in exile, "Say to Daughter Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey.'" And this king comes, riding into Jerusalem, riding towards his death, that he might rescue a people living in darkness.

And it is this story – this story of needing redemption and of being redeemed, this story of Jesus the Christ – that is at the heart of what it means to be church, that gives the church her identity in the world.

And so Yoder offers another possibility for the church: to be a "confessing church," which says Hauwerwas and Willimon, finds "its main political task to lie, not in the personal transformation of individual hearts or the modification of society, but rather in the congregation's determination to worship Christ in all things."

Five They go on: "The confessing church, like the conversionist church, also calls people to conversion, but it depicts that conversion as a long process of being baptismally engrafted into a new people, an alternative *polis*, a countercultural social structure called church. It seeks to influence the world by being the church, that is, by being something the world is not and can never be, lacking the gift of faith and vision, which is ours in Christ. The confessing church seeks the *visible* church, a place, clearly visible to the world, in which people are faithful to their promises, love their enemies, tell the truth, honor the

poor, suffer for righteousness, and thereby testify to the amazing community-creating power of God.”

When we are focused, not on being accessible or palatable or even effective in our witness to the world, but on the person of Jesus Christ, the Church will be what God intended for her to be – a body that witnesses to the world its need for salvation, and that salvation has come.

Focused on Christ, the Church will call people to repentance and to a personal relationship with Jesus. Focused on Christ, the Church will also seek to live out the very real political claims of Christ’s kingdom. The Church cannot be a place of *either* personal salvation *or* social justice. We cannot rely on liberal politics or conservative politics to support the church’s mission. Christ came to redeem the world unto himself. All things hold together in him – you, me, our institutions, our political engagements, our work, and our worship.

Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat highlight this in their targum, their creative interpretation of Colossians 1:15-20. They write,

Six In the face of a disconnected world
where home is a domain in cyberspace
where neighborhood is a chat room
where public space is a shopping mall
where information technology promises
a tuned-in, reconnected world
all things hold together in Christ
the creation is a deeply personal cosmos
all cohering and interconnected in Jesus

Seven And this sovereignty takes on cultural flesh
And this coherence of all things is socially embodied

in the church

against all odds

against most of the evidence

In a “show me” culture where words alone don’t cut it

the church is

the flesh-and-blood

here-and-now

in time and history

with joys and sorrows

embodiment of this Christ

Eight as a body politic

around a common meal

in alternative economic practices

in radical service to the most vulnerable

in refusal of the empire

in love of this creation

the church reimagines the world

in the image of the invisible God

Will this make us stand out? Here’s hoping. Because the world needs to see the church. **Nine** “Without the church,” say Hauerwas and Willimon, “the world does not know who it is. The only way for the world to know that it is being redeemed is for the church to point to the Redeemer by being a redeemed people. The way for the world to know that it needs redeeming, that it is broken and fallen, is for the church to enable the world to strike hard against something which is an alternative to what the world offers.”

Ten So we are reminded of what Pastor Carel preached on a few weeks ago. Peter tells the church, “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession – or, in the King

James Version, 'a peculiar people' – that you may declare the praise of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

May the world see our worship, and hear our words, and contemplate our deeds. And may that worship, and those words and those deeds be oriented towards Jesus, the one who is redeeming all things unto himself, the one who is our true king, the one to whom our allegiance and our worship belongs.

Would you pray with me?

Oh God, help us be a peculiar people.

Give us the courage to stand out,
that we might bear witness to the ways
you are turning the world upside down.

Help us to live as citizens of your kingdom,
as followers of Jesus, who calls us into relationship with him,
and who leads us into a new way of life
as he redeems all things to himself.

You alone, O God, are our King.

We worship you, and give our lives to you.

We pray this in Jesus' name,
and in the power of the Holy Spirit,
amen.

