



“When Small is Big”

*The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring
Eden United Church of Christ*

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
June 21, 2009
I Sam 17:41–50 (NRSV)

SCRIPTURE READING

I Sam 17:41–50

Stephanie S. Spencer

*The Philistine came on and drew near to David, with his shield-bearer in front of him. When the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was only a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance. The Philistine said to David, ‘Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?’ And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. The Philistine said to David, ‘Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the field.’ But David said to the Philistine, ‘You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This very day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head; and I will give the dead bodies of the Philistine army this very day to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth, so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that **the Lord does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord’s and he will give you into our hand.**’*

When the Philistine drew nearer to meet David, David ran quickly towards the battle line to meet the Philistine. David put his hand in his bag, took out a stone, slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead; the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell face down on the ground.

So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone, striking down the Philistine and killing him; there was no sword in David’s hand.

Sermon

“When Small Is Big” The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

One of the first songs I learned as a child in Sunday School was a song about today’s Old Testament reading. Maybe you remember it too. Maybe not. I thought surely at least Loris would know this one, but I stumped the entire worship team during “Name That Tune” last week with this one. So much for childhood nostalgia. The title of the song is “Only a Boy Named David.” The text, minus the tune, goes like this:

Only a boy named David
Only a little sling
Only a boy named David
But he could pray and sing

Only a boy named David
Only a rippling brook
Only a boy named David
But five little stones he took.

And one little stone went in the sling
And the sling went round and round
And one little stone went in the sling
And the sling went round and round
And round and round
And round and round
And round and round and round
And one little prayer went up to God
And the giant came tumbling down.

This song was particularly popular with the rambunctious boys in my class, as they became more expressive with motions as they became more familiar with the text. By the time we had sung the song three times, some of them took on more the character of Goliath than David.

The song, "Only a Boy Named David," is deeply imbedded in my earliest memories of Sunday School and the Hebrew scriptures. In fact, whenever I see or hear the name, King David, I remember this song.

Similarly, the story behind this song is deeply imbedded in the memory of Israel. The story of David and Goliath is a hero narrative, much like the type that we tell about George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Most of us learned as children that George Washington chopped down his father's cherry tree, and that Abe Lincoln walked a mile to repay someone a penny.

Whether or not these stories are factually true is trivial to most Americans. What matters are the qualities that these stories conveyed about our heroes, which made them uniquely suited for national leadership. The story, "David and Goliath," served a similar purpose for King David as the cherry tree and debt repayment stories served for George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.

Whether there was a man named Goliath, whether David battled Goliath, and whether the giant's defeat took place in the way it was described in I Samuel 17, is immaterial to the Hebrew storyteller and the teller's audience. What was and is important about the story is the qualities that it conveyed about David.

David is remembered as a great orator, a fierce warrior, and a person of strong faith. More broadly, he is also remembered as the best king in the history of Israel, because of his deep faith and the humility he demonstrated in confessing his sins and amending his behavior.

This evidence of strong faith, in the view of Israel, which was evidenced already in his youth, enabled David to lead and persevere in his adulthood as the King of Israel. This story further illustrates that David's strength came from God, and as one friend put it recently, reminds us that God does NOT call the equipped, but rather, equips the called.

II

Like all good hero narratives, the story about David and Goliath not only extols the virtues of the king, it also codifies and conveys values that our ancestors held dear to their hearts—values that were not only tied to Israel's identity, but also tied to their vitality as a nation and as a faith community. These values were the values of faith and courage—values that Israel was called on time and again to express in situations where they as a nation more often than not played the role of David, and their adversaries presented more like the Philistines, and their giant, Goliath.

Let's think for a moment about who the Philistines and Goliath were.

Historians of the Ancient Near East sometimes refer to the Philistines as “the Sea People.” Their origins are not known with certainty. Most who venture a guess say that they originated from somewhere on the Euro-Mediterranean coast. A few are more specific and argue that the Philistines were from the Grecian peninsula.

The Philistines are thought to have arrived along the southern coast of Canaan by boat, just prior to the arrival of the Hebrews in Canaan, and they settled and inhabited the five major cities in Gaza that were part of the Egyptians' territory.

The Philistines were a peculiar people in the eyes of other Ancient Near Eastern nations. Perhaps this was so because of the Philistines' distant origins.¹ Despite their differences from Israel and her neighbors, the Philistines were undoubtedly a powerful people. When David was a boy, they had the largest and strongest navy and army in the Ancient Near East. This was because they had mastered the art of ironsmithing, which gave them the capacity to outfit their army and navy with the best equipment, as we see illustrated in the description of Goliath's armor.

Israel feared the Philistines more than any other enemy. Their famous warrior, Goliath, was the epitome of everything that the Sea People represented, and everything that the Israelites feared.

Goliath was a famous warrior. Big. Strong, Tall. And fierce in battle. But that is not all. He was also a classic bully. He used what UCC Old Testament theologian, Walter Brueggemann, describes as “psychological warfare.” Goliath taunted, insulted, and

¹N.b., during the Victorian era, authors such as Goethe, Swift, and Arnold popularized the use of the term “Philistines” to describe derogatorily persons who were not schooled in the liberal arts and who did not support the fine arts.

threatened his adversaries, including the little shepherd boy, David (131).² When Goliath saw David approach him on the battlefield, Goliath said to David:

'Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?' And [then Goliath] cursed David...[and] said to David, 'Come to me, and I will [feed your flesh] to the birds...and...the wild animals...'

Goliath was a big-time bully.

III

The story of David and Goliath is almost 3000 years old, and yet the characters and the plot are as timely as any story that we could tell or reflect on this morning. We live in a world where nations are constantly at war with each other, and where Goliaths roam the earth literally and figuratively.

Sometimes our own nation has played the part of the Philistines, or we have been perceived as Philistines, in particular as Goliath, by those whom we invaded. Sometimes other nations have played the part of the Philistines, e.g., the Germans, the Soviet Union, North Korea, etc.

On a national level, we seem to be becoming a people increasingly smitten with the values and armaments of the Philistines. I woke up yesterday morning to a news report on NPR explaining that gun sales have increased by 32% in our nation, since Barak Obama was elected President.³

Also, as many of us heard in the news the previous week, in reports surrounding the Holocaust Museum rampage by James W. von Brunn, the number of hate groups in our nation has grown by 50% since 2000⁴. Our own state of California sadly leads the nation with 84 documented hate groups, according to the Southern Poverty Law Center.⁵ And seven of those 84 groups are located within 50 miles of our church.

Even closer to home, as we have learned in recent weeks, there are several conservative law firms backed by Christian fundamentalists who are using the law to bully public schools, libraries, and governments into the following:

- 1) promoting creationism in school science curriculum,
- 2) eliminating, or at minimum instituting, opt-out policies around comprehensive sexuality curriculum (which, in California, is state mandated),
- 3) limiting—if not eliminating—diversity education programs from public school, and

² Walter Brueggemann, First and Second Samuel, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), p. 131.

³ <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=105713194>

⁴ <http://www.splcenter.org/intel/intelreport/article.jsp?aid=1052>

⁵ <http://www.splcenter.org/intel/map/hate.jsp?s=CA>

- 4) attempting to ban—and in some cases even burning—books which they find objectionable.

These conservative law firms include such groups as the **Pacific Justice Institute**⁶ (PJI), the Capital Resource Institute, the Thomas More Law Center, and the Christian Civil Liberties Union.

The Pacific Justice Institute of Sacramento and Orange County is the group that brought suit against the Castro Valley Unified School District last month. The petitioners' suit seeks documents related to Days of Diversity, and in particular my presentation this past March. PJI is the same group that sued the Novato Unified School District for hosting a theatre production called "Cuties," which is designed to encourage empathy and reduce bullying among grade school children. PJI has also threatened to sue the Alameda Unified School District for introducing an anti-bullying, safe schools, and diversity education program in grades K–5.

The **Capital Resource Institute** of Sacramento has also been organizing and threatening the Alameda school district with a lawsuit similar to the type that PJI took against the CUSD. Their goal is to stop the introduction in a School Board-approved diversity education curriculum for K–5th grade.⁷

The **Thomas More Law Center**⁸ in Ann Arbor, MI, has successfully convinced and supported the inclusion of creationism in a public school curriculum in a school in Pennsylvania.

Earlier this month, a group called the **Christian Civil Liberties Union**, which is located in Milwaukee, sued the City of West Bend, Wisconsin, for including in their library a book that describes a gay teen's coming out story. They are suing for hundreds of thousands of dollars and have also launched a campaign to recall the mayor of West Bend.⁹

So, perhaps we are agreed, that we live in a world with some people and some groups behave like the Ancient Philistines and their giant, Goliath. Some of these attended or attend our schools, or lived in our neighborhoods.

IV

The Child Assault Prevention Program, which shares space with us on our campus, spends a significant amount of time consulting in area schools on just this topic.

⁶ <http://www.pacificjustice.org/resources/news/focusdetails.cfm?ID=PR090506a>

⁷ <http://www.capitolresource.org/>

⁸ http://www.thomasmore.org/default-sb_thomasmore.html?216311571

⁹ <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=7874866&page=1>

As part of our last Confirmation Class, we invited Norma Rodriguez, the Executive Director of CAP, to facilitate a learning session with our students on this topic. When she asked our kids how common bullying was in their schools, they all said that it was very common. We spent an evening with the kids exploring how to respond effectively to the “Goliaths” in our schools and communities.

I was interested in the fact that Izzi Newey, who attended our confirmation orientation earlier this month and who was confirmed three years ago, said that Norma’s presentation was one of the best parts of confirmation for her.

I think it’s helpful for all of us to be aware too, that programs like the diversity education curriculum that is being introduced in the K–5th grade in Alameda, and the diversity programs that have long been part of the Hayward, Castro Valley, San Leandro, Fremont, and other neighboring public schools, are grounded in efforts to achieve school goals around safety and the reduction of bullying. (c.f., for an illustration of the group dynamics of bullying: <http://www.psychologymatters.org/images/bullycircle.pdf>). The need for programs that address the experiences of LGBT, young women, and people of color seem particularly needed in light of the significantly higher reports of abuse that these kids take at school—abuse that often goes unchecked.

According to the *2007 National School Climate Survey*, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth—and youth perceived to be LGBT—reported by far the most frequent incidents of harassment and assault on California school campuses. Women who reported sexual harassment, and women and men who reported incidents of harassment and assault based on racial or ethnic group, ranked third and fourth respectively in the research findings.¹⁰

Schools that offer “Safe, Strong, and Free” programs, like the type that CAP offers in our public schools, are making a difference, as Izzi tells us, in the life of our young people and in the school culture as a whole. This spring, California also developed a cyber-bullying policy that prohibits cyber bullying and sanctions offenders.

Based on anecdotal evidence that I have garnered from three years of speaking at “Days of Diversity” (DOD) in Castro Valley, I know that programs like DOD are making a difference for our kids in the reduction of bullying that occurs against LGBT kids at that high school. For example, every year when I speak at the high school, I ask the students with whom I speak to complete two index cards. On one card, I ask them to write a question for me and pass it forward. I tell them to leave their name off, and that I’ll respond to as many questions as time allows.

On the other note card, I ask the kids to write on a scale of one to five their response to the question, “How hard or easy is it to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender at CVHS?” Let 1 = “It’s so cool to be gay that everyone wants to be gay,” and let 5 = “It’s so scary to be gay at CVHS that you could die here if people knew that you were gay.”

¹⁰ N.b., Interest has grown considerably in understanding the phenomenon of bullying since the Columbine massacre ten years ago: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Columbine_High_School_massacre

I'm sorry to report that the first two years that I spoke at the high school there was at least one student in each class who answered "5," meaning, "You could die here for being gay." This past year, when I spoke at the high school, by contrast, I could see growth in the kids in terms of awareness about gay culture, and about acceptance of persons who weren't exactly like them. The kids asked great questions, and seemed to have really healthy attitudes about the entire spirit of the program. This year, none of the students said, "You could get killed here if people knew that you were gay." I left the campus feeling very hopeful about the younger generation and feeling like DOD and related programs were creating a healthier school climate for all students.

V

So the story of David and Goliath is not only imbedded in Israel's culture, the reality of bullies seems imbedded in our modern culture too. How should we respond?

The research of a Norwegian educational psychologist named Dr. Olweus has led to the development of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, a comprehensive, multilevel, school-wide program designed to reduce and prevent bullying among students in elementary, middle, and junior high schools. It has also been adapted for use in some high schools. The program is offered to all of Norway's public schools as part of a government-sponsored initiative. A growing number of schools in the U.S. now use this program, too. The intervention program is built on four key principles with the goal of creating a school—and ideally, also a home—environment characterized by:

- (1) warmth, positive interest, and involvement from adults;
- (2) firm limits on unacceptable behavior;
- (3) consistent application of non-punitive, non-physical sanctions for unacceptable behavior and violation of rules; and,
- (4) adults who act as authorities and positive role models.

The program is based on systems theory and behavioral modification, and aims to change the "opportunity and reward structures" for bullying behavior, by creating fewer opportunities and rewards for bullying.¹¹

While I support all four of Dr. Olweus' steps, there is also a fifth practice described in today's scripture that enriches and grounds all efforts to address bullying that is needed. That is faith. David ultimately put his faith in God, not in military might.

¹¹ c.f., <http://www.stopbullyingnow.hrsa.gov/kids/> for example of online training for kids.)

Having faith, especially in difficult times, is not easy, but God can and God will work in and through our small amount of faith, as he did in the life of David. God can and God will equip and embolden us to face the Goliaths and the Philistines in our lives. God can and God will work through our efforts to affirm God's love for our children, through teaching respect for others. God can and God will give us the true victory. Thanks be to God. Amen.