



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Commitment

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The Second Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Mark 3:20-35

Like Christmas advertisements, coming earlier every year, the 2016 election cycle has begun already. Don't you wish it were like a National Public Radio fundraiser? There would be no end to political contributions if they could convince us that by donating we could buy back even a weekend from on air and online political ads reminding us how bad the other guys are. During the last election cycle, I went to a fundraiser for a US senator from another state who had come to a loft apartment in midtown to raise money to defeat her Republican opponent. She asked for our support so that she could block the Republicans and their agenda. I thought this is what is wrong with our system: We elect our politicians to block other politicians and when they do, we complain. Like the people of Israel in the time of Samuel, we look for a king or a queen. We want a wise leader who will take over the reins of government and govern compassionately. Someone who will inspire us to do things well, especially all those people with whom we disagree. A king who will defend us from our enemies, fight our battles and win, someone to represent us in the councils of the nations.

The desire and petition for a king bewilders the prophet Samuel. He, after all, has grown rather attached to the way things are and does not understand why things need to change. The elders of the people are clear: "You are old and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations." In his frustration Samuel goes to God, and God tells him not to worry and not to take it personally. So Samuel warns the people about the dangers of having a king and then helps to anoint a king; and when that one doesn't work out so well, he anoints another.

This week on National Public Radio there was the story of another politician. Ari Shapiro interviewed retired Navy Admiral William McRaven, who is now serving as the Chancellor of the University of Texas System. It seems that the Texas legislature has passed a law to allow concealed handguns on college campuses. Now for the record, as one might suspect of the career naval officer who ran US Special Operations Command and oversaw the raid that killed Osama Bin Laden, Chancellor McRaven describes himself as a big Second Amendment guy. He goes on to catalog his personal collection of weapons including nine guns and six swords and two tomahawks. In spite of this, he has argued against passage of this law because in his new role his job is to ensure the safety of everyone on the University campuses. In spite of the Chancellor's opposition, the Texas Legislature passed the bill. The interviewer tried to get the Chancellor to say that the campuses will be less safe when the law goes into effect. McRaven, in spite of his opposition, says, "I'm not prepared to say that, because my time in the military has taught me that you argue a point up until a decision is made. And the state legislature has made a decision—and presuming that the governor signs the bill, it will go into effect. And then my job as the chancellor is to make sure that we continue to make the campuses as safe as possible, and we're going to do that." The ability to stop arguing once a decision has been made and to adjust to the facts on the ground and continue to carry on: that characterizes the finest military units and the most resilient families and the healthiest parishes. It requires the ability to distinguish between attachment and commitment. In this case I would say that Chancellor McRaven, by not being attached to defeating the law allowing concealed handguns to be carried on campus, can fulfill on his commitment to make the campuses as safe as possible.

In fact it is this ability to be committed and not attached, to adjust to the facts on the ground and to carry on that characterizes God throughout history. I find this curious because according to most religious authorities one of the attributes of God is that God is supposed to be unchanging, and we are encouraged to conform to God's plan, which

often reflects the plan of the religious authority. And yet beginning in the Garden of Eden it seems that God changes his plan to account for the ways of humanity. Ever since we quit the easy communion and community with God that was represented by the story of the Garden of Eden, we human beings haven't changed much. We want what we want and we want it now. God, on the other hand, changes to meet us in our deepest desires and to call us to re-establish that easy communion and community.

Think of the story of Samuel when the people want a king. It has been told from the frame of reference of Samuel, who sees the people as rejecting himself and God. In the end it is a story of God who remains faithful to his own love of the people of God by adapting to changing circumstances on the ground. God continues to love the people despite their own desire to get what they want when they want it no matter what the consequences are. In fact, God is so committed to the importance of showing his love for humanity that the monarchy becomes the new way to demonstrate his love.

The difference is between God's ongoing commitment to the people of Israel and the attachment of Samuel to keeping things the way they have always been, or the attachment of the people of Israel to the idea of having a king.

As Jesus is teaching, the crowds grow until he and the disciples do not even take time to eat. Detractors begin to say that he is either out of his mind or in league with the devil. His family comes, and when he is told about it he says, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." For Jesus it seems that commitment is more important than attachment. Commitment to the will of God even transcends family ties.

What then is the will of God? I believe that for Jesus the will of God is that we forgive one another for our sins and blasphemies and experience forgiveness for ourselves. Forgiving others and experiencing forgiveness allows us to separate from our anxious attachment to be loved by others, and it allows us to love and be loved.

And when we experience that love we realize that nothing can separate us from the will, the Word, and love of God. Then we can commit ourselves to establishing the kingdom of God on earth where everyone can enjoy the easy communion and community with God that was represented by the story of the Garden of Eden.