

A Sermon on 1 Samuel 17: 1a, 4-11, 19-23, 32-54
June 21, 2009
Pentecost 3 B

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A photograph appeared this week in *Slate* in a series on fatherhood. This black and white photo was from 1995 in Bosnia.¹ A boy sat on a fence smiling. Before him was a very old and beaten up car over the fender of which was a large father, bearded, in a work jumpsuit. His arm outstretched over the fender grasps the hand of another young boy. Their faces are contorted, strained. They are in contest, in a competition of hand wrestling. A man, perhaps without even knowing it, is teaching his son how to be a man through testing himself against another. Is there any good news for them today?

Henry James, Sr., judged that American Protestantism by the mid-nineteenth century was in a sorry state. He wrote, “[R] eligion in the old virile sense has disappeared and been replaced by a feeble . . . sentimentality.”² Making the point even more forcefully, Ann Douglas refers to Charles Follen, who died in 1842, in writing, “The conscious force of church authority has given way to the unconscious influence of domestic affection; adult politics have succumbed to infantile piety, *Ecclesia* to a nursery. Masculinity is vanquished in the congregation and even more significantly, from the pulpit.”³

This week I have been asking people three questions. I have asked them if they in a word or two could say what comes into their mind when they heard the words, “traditional masculinity.” The answers have tended to cluster around words like *provider* and *protector*. I then asked if such a descriptor was for them a “positive” or “negative” trait. Those responding “negative” outnumbered those that responded “positive.” My last question was whether or not there was room in the church for a person with the descriptor they had named. That’s when people got thoughtful. They knew the right answer: *all* are welcome in the church. But they hesitated at welcoming those labeled as traditionally masculine.

One’s sex, we might offer, is a matter of biology and genes. One’s gender, however, is socially constructed. How one chooses to live as a woman or a man is influenced by many, many determinants. These days there is considerably more gender variety to choose from. There are many ways to be a woman or a man.

¹ © Nikos Economopoulos, Magnum Photos.

² Quoted in Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p. 17.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Post-Freudians⁴ describe a difference between men and women in the gender roles they live into. They assume that each of us begin as infants with an identification with the mother. Though very different from a Freudian description, this is basically what Freud called “primary narcissism,” where the infant does not distinguish between self and mother.⁵

A critical threshold comes when the child needs to distinguish between self and mother. In this distinguishing a boy has a special liability. He must push away from his sense of unity with the mother. He must become *different* from the one he once could not distinguish from himself. David Gilmore writes,

To become a separate person the boy must perform a great deed. He must pass a test; he must break the chain to his mother. He must renounce his bond to her and seek his own way in the world.⁶

Norman Mailer famously wrote, “Masculinity is not something given to you, something you’re born with, but something you gain. . . . And you gain it by winning small battles with honor.”⁷ Masculinity is always an effort, an achievement, a passing of a test.⁸ With this in mind I have long wondered about the story of David and Goliath.

In 1st Samuel David is described as the little brother of Jesse’s eight sons. While his other brothers battled the Philistines as soldiers, David was only regarded as a junior errand-boy. The Bible describes him as small, “ruddy and handsome,” hardly the traits of a warrior.⁹ He is explicitly called “only a boy.”

“Only a boy” he does not stay. Through this confrontation, this “test,” David before Goliath becomes a man of a certain kind. I recall as a boy seeing this story acted out on the flannel graph and wondering if I’d ever be that brave. I suppose I wondered if I would ever be a man like that.

David is explicitly described in 1st Samuel as a mighty man of valor, a warrior, intelligent of speech, beautiful, and skilful in playing. David’s career as a warrior is by far the most prominent. Thirty-eight instances in the biblical narrative describe killings by David. By

⁴ E.g., Erik Erickson, Edith Jacobson, D. W. Winnicott and others.

⁵ David S. Gilmore, *Masculinity in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 26-7.

⁶ Gilmore, p. 28.

⁷ *Armies of the Night* (New York: New American Library, 1968) p. 25. Other literary examples of this sort of man include Paul Hemingway, Studs Terkel, James Dickey, Jim Harrison, and Tom McGuane, sometimes called the “virility school” of literature. Gilmore, p. 19.

⁸ Of course, as a social construction, “femininity” is also sought and achieved by women. I want to make the case for a particularly male way this is done in masculinity.

⁹ See Dan Clendenin, “‘After He Killed Him, He Cut Off His Head;’ David, Goliath, and Sacred Violence” at www.journeywithjesus.net (June 15, 2009).

this reckoning David's body count is about 140,000 men not counting the additional fifteen whose deaths he is said to be personally responsible.¹⁰ That is quite a record for a musician, a guitar player at that. Whether historically accurate or not, David's masculinity was a reflection of cultural norms of the author's time. And David's construction of masculinity was certainly very influential among men in biblical times.

Throughout history commentators have interpreted David with considerable approval. Since those commentators are overwhelmingly male, perhaps they were approving this sort of masculinity. By one writer, David "was all that men find wholesome and admirable in man."¹¹

This sort of traditional masculinity has been under considerable pressure in the last quarter century. Is there good news for this man? If you are a man who is traditionally described as a forceful competitor, a risk taker, a provider and protector, brave, standing firm in a confrontation, aggressive in the right circumstance, courageous, strong, well, here is David before Goliath for you.¹² The biblical story values men like this.

There is good news here for us all. This, in the end, is not about just one sex. It is about men *and* women. Roger Cohen writes of the considerably dangerous crisis in the streets of Iran,

I also know that Iran's women stand in the vanguard. For days now, I've seen them urging less courageous men on. I've seen them get beaten and return to the fray. "Why are you sitting there?" one shouted at a couple of men perched on the sidewalk on Saturday. "Get up! Get up!"¹³

This is about people – men *and* women -- who are forceful competitor, risk takers, providers and protectors, brave, who stand firm in a confrontation, aggressive in the right circumstance, courageous, strong. Societies benefit from the presence of people like that, people who are in some sense the children of David.

When David is about to die he passes on this wisdom to his child Solomon, "Be strong, show yourself a man."¹⁴ Another translation renders this, "Be strong, be courageous."¹⁵

¹⁰ David J. A. Cline, "David the Man: The Construction of Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible," *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, 205; Gender, Culture Theory, 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 212-42. This reference is to page 6 in the edition published at www.shef.ac.uk/bibs/DJACcurrres/David.html.

¹¹ David M. Howard cited in Cline, p. 25.

¹² We could all point to instances where this kind of masculinity has run amok. Nonetheless, applied in the right circumstances there is strength to this model.

¹³ Roger Cohen, "A Supreme Leader Loses His Aura as Iranians Flock to the Streets," *The New York Times*, June 21, 2009.

¹⁴ NIV.

¹⁵ NRSV.

The presence of David is encourages our own bold bravery.

There is another photo in the *Slate* essay. It was created by Henri Cartier-Bresson in 1972. In it a father stretches his arm straight up. In his outstretched arm he holds a little girl by the feet. She stands upon the hands of her father. She would be learning from him how to be a brave person in the face of contest and confrontation. For men *or* women David shows us what you and I can aspire to in extreme circumstances. And yes, there is room for all of these in the church. Sometimes they are especially needed. And that is good news indeed. Amen.