

The Parable of the Black Panther
1 Samuel 15:34-16:13
2 Corinthians 5
Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
Seventh Sunday of Easter
Woodbury UMC
May 21, 2023

The reading from Samuel lays the background for a transition in leadership – for some reason as I was reading this a transition in leadership was very much on my mind. We know what is coming. We are going to go from a king who has failed, and who God has deemed no longer fit to serve, to perhaps the greatest king, the one called Beloved by God, the one whose life is of mythical, even epic proportions.

A great epic often has a great origin story, and this one is fantastic. If you are familiar with Joseph Campbell's writing about *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, the story of David follows this general template pretty closely, with the greatest hero coming from the most humble of circumstances. David is a shepherd – not an impressive occupation – and he is the youngest son of many brothers – so his prospects are extremely

limited due to the importance of birth order in those days. When the prophet came to the house of Jesse, Jesse did not even bother sending for him. To be any lower in the pecking order, David would have had to be one of the sheep!

There is a lot going on here. God has decided that it is time for a change in leadership, and this is in a culture where such things typically happen when the new leader murders the old leader – unless they are murdered themselves. (While we Methodists pride ourselves on being highly scriptural based, I am pleased we did not adopt this custom!) So Samuel has good reason to fear his imminent end as he seeks to anoint the new king. In our scripture, the leaders of the town are nervous to even see him approach, for they know that carnage often follows such things. Samuel himself? He probably knew what happens to prophets – not a lot of them died of old age – but he did what God asked anyway. I also quite like the way towards the end of that piece that David is described. Good looking and dark skinned.

I thought that was a good tie in with *Black Panther*. A major focal point of this movie is where it takes place, the land of Wakanda, a

fictional African nation where much it is a technological utopia, largely due to it being the only place in the world where you can get a certain natural resource which is used for all sorts of things. It is the source of their power and wealth. It is the only African nation to escape being colonized and plundered by outsiders. For self-preservation, Wakanda has hidden all of its power and riches from the rest of the world, and instead presents themselves as an impoverished, Third World nation. They are isolationist, and been so for generations. At the start of the movie, Wakanda has a new king, T'Challa, also known as the costumed hero Black Panther, and now it is up to him to decide how best to lead his country. Does he continue to stay isolated? Or should his nation take a role on the world stage?

While considering these big questions, a stranger arrives one day. He is called Killmonger, and he is from a part of the Wakandan royal family that everybody thought had died off. Not only is he alive, he is angry, and one of the first things he does is to challenge T'Challa for the throne. Why so angry? Why would he want to be king in the first place? The accusation that he levels against the king is brutal. He says:

Two billion people all over the world who look like us whose lives are much harder than they could have been, and Wakanda has the tools to liberate them all. Where was Wakanda?

I had to look up that those were the words he used in his accusation, and on reflection, if anything, Killmonger is being gentle. Centuries of the middle passage, slave trade, unimaginable death and pain leading up through Jim Crow and into living memory. And where was Wakanda during all of that?

Well, in Wakanda, as with David and Saul, one way to become the new king is to kill off the current king. That sets up the primary tension that we have and the main storyline of the entire film. Which is the right path for the young king – self preservation through isolation? Or does he have a responsibility to use their vast power and wealth to help make people's lives better? Now, of course, the king in question dresses up as a panther and fights bad guys, too. But there is a lot of depth here that you don't often see in so-called comic book or action movies.

Importantly, just because Killmonger is the antagonist does not change the fact that he is absolutely right. He calls for war and violence

– because he is the bad guy – but the idea that you should always stay on the sidelines, focused on self-preservation when you have the power not only to end suffering, protect the vulnerable, and save lives?! That is hard to defend. He is blinded by his own pain to the evil of his methods, but he does have a point that Wakanda in this scenario has abandoned the rest of the world. They could have stopped centuries of pain and death. They did not.

If this was read as a parable, what would be the message that we are to learn from this parable?

One of the central themes of *Black Panther* is how our actions can have powerful and long-reaching consequences. Early on in the film, viewers witness the previous Black Panther (T'Challa's father) do something terrible in order to protect his country. He thought he made the right decision, but his mistake ultimately returns to wreak havoc on his family. Rather than admit any fault, those involved continue to make excuses for their actions. Only once T'Challa confronts them is peace finally restored to the kingdom. The Church is responsible for some of the greatest moments throughout history, but we've also been complicit in

some of the worst, and again and again we respond by trying to hide our mistakes out of embarrassment or fear it will impact our cultural standing. Yet scripture teaches there can be no healing without truth (James 5:16), and a Church that doesn't acknowledge its mistakes is doomed to repeat them. If Christians hope to be meaningful disciples for Christ, we must first have the courage to admit when we're wrong.

As I thought about this, I turn to the United Methodist Social Principles, which we spent a few weeks studying earlier this year. They summarize essentially the official United Methodist position on a wide variety of social issues, and it is important enough that we have them in our *Book of Discipline* – our main rule book. A quick look at them shows that they give Methodist positions on everything from economic justice, abortion, adoption, divorce and marriage, gender roles, food justice, energy resources, the climate — All the really tough stuff. We've thought about it, and this is where we record our positions. And furthermore, we have an entire branch of the church called the General Board of Church and Society, and their task is implementing the social principles. I quote from their web site:

The job is to relate the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Church, communities, and the world in which they live, bringing the whole

of human life into conformity with the will of God, and showing that reconciliation involves personal, social and civic righteousness.

I'll come back to that later. There is a lot there. Furthermore, consider these words taken from our *United Methodist Book of Resolutions*, a sort of companion to the Discipline. Here's what it says:

Taking an active stance in society is nothing new for followers of John Wesley. He set the example for us to combine personal and social piety. Ever since predecessor churches to United Methodism flourished in the United States, we have been known as a denomination involved with people's lives, with political and social struggles, having local to international mission implications. Such involvement is an expression of the personal change we experience in our baptism and conversion.

The United Methodist Church believes God's love for the world is an active and engaged love, a love seeking justice and liberty. We cannot just be observers. So we care enough about people's lives to risk interpreting God's love, to take a stand, to call each of us into a response, no matter how controversial or complex. The church helps us think and act out a faith perspective, not just responding to all the other 'mind-makers-up' that exist in our society.

It's a lot, right? Each sentence there deserves its own sermon.

What does this mean, to us? I am pretty sure what it is saying that to avoid inflicting harm ourselves is not enough – that **we are called to**

actively dismantle that which would cause harm, to take risks individually and collectively, and work publicly to bring God's justice to a world that so sorely needs it. And I bet we all agree on this. We should work to do good. This might make some of you a little bit uncomfortable, but I don't think very many of you actively oppose the idea of doing good. One of the challenges that comes with being a pastor is how you manage that tension. I believe that a church that is all words and no action is not much of a church at all, maybe more of a discussion group.

And of course, if someone calls a pastor "political," I've got to say I've never heard that as a compliment. Where things get complicated isn't that we all want to do good. The question is HOW do we go about it? THAT is where it gets complicated. Right now, it's no secret that we are a nation very much divided in many ways – and yet, I have hope. Every bit of this that I've mentioned – all of it – means taking a risk. We are risking our own comfort, our own security.

I think this is a bit like what Paul was talking about in his letter to the Corinthians, when he said:

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

We knew Jesus from a human point of you, now, we see Jesus quite differently. We know the world from a human point of view. What would it look like to now see the world from a Christ-infused perspective?

What does our world look like today? The strong prey on the weak, and the weak are regularly scapegoated for political power and economic gain, the powerful using human lives for political stunts, confident that no one will stand up for them. It seems pretty bad, but to be honest this IS the way of our world, and without question in May 2023, this is American public life.

Wakanda is a utopia, but their thriving society has come at a cost. Throughout the film we see how Wakanda has turned its back on the

world. Its affluence has not made it become generous, rather it made their leaders petty and fearful. Rather than reaching out to help those in need, the country chooses to put itself above others. Doing so paves the way for a villain to take political power by bringing out the worst in his people.

But what if we were to regard our situation differently, taking Paul seriously when he implored the Corinthian church to “outdo one another in showing honor -- serve the Lord...extend hospitality to strangers.” I tried to avoid spoilers, but Black Panther ends with the king addressing a news conference at the United Nations. Here is what he says:

"Wakanda will no longer watch from the shadows. We cannot. We must not," T'Challa declares. "We will work to be an example of how we as brothers and sisters on this earth should treat each other. Now, more than ever, the illusions of division threaten our very existence. We all know the truth: more connects us than separates us. But in times of crisis, the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another as if we were one single tribe."

The choice the Wakandans face at that point is a choice between isolation and fear. Institutional self preservation at the cost of ignoring

people for whom it would be easy for them to help. Or joining the rest of the world, and in doing so helping others?

Scripture tells Christians that we are, “salt and light to the world” (Matthew 5:13-16). *We* are the peacemakers, *we* are the world’s spiritual guides, and *we* are the good guys who will stand up to injustice. See where this is leading? Like Wakanda, we can become consumed by our own self-interest. Instead of meeting our neighbors, we shun them, and instead of helping those in need, we turn them away in the name of self-protection. That is not the way Christ called us to live, or the example of the life of Jesus.

Just yesterday, the *New York Times* ran a story about two faculty members who were fired from Houghton University, an upstate New York school affiliated w a conservative branch of Methodism.

In a letter, they were told they was fired “as a result of your refusal to remove pronouns in your email signature” as well as for criticizing an administration decision to the student newspaper.

They claim they included their pronouns because they wanted to engage with society’s downtrodden as Jesus Christ might have done, they said.

One of those fired said “I think it boils down to: They want to be trans-exclusive and they want to communicate that to potential students and the parents of potential students,”.

“At the end of the day, it has no bearing on what I actually believe or what I think is a sin or not a sin,” said one of those fired. “It all comes down to: Am I loving people in a way that reflects Christ?”

“We live in a very divided world right now where everything is this or that, right or left, conservative or liberal, Republican or Democrat,” she added. “As Christians, I think we’ve gotten so caught up in these ideas of, ‘This is what I should be advocating for or upset about, ’that we forget to actually care for people.”

When I tell people I am a United Methodist minister, I hear stuff like this all the time.

So what do we do? Isolation and fear? Self preservation for a few years longer, at the cost of ignoring people rather than standing against those who would deny their God-made humanity?

And now I’ve preached myself into a corner. I think we can all agree that there are some things in this world that are not good, but nailing down a solution to those things is where things get political.

And that is not what I want to do. There are no easy answers to any of these problems. But there ARE answers.

I think that it is up to each one of us to decide what answer works for us. The answers may be very different if you are conservative or liberal, Republican or Democrat, where you live or any number of factors. So long as we agree on the challenges, and we are working on them from our own context, I think we are heading in the right direction. My prayer is that we as Christians and as Methodists live as a people who are willing to wrestle with the hard questions, people who do the work of trying to discern answers – and above all, that we can be a people determined to take ACTION. This is my prayer, and this is my blessing. May it be so. Amen.