Standards that Heal Civil Discourse

For annual 4th of July service 2019

# Scripture: 1 Samuel 26

# Key Thought: The values that helped bring reconciliation between David and Saul can help us today.

# Intro:

## The Election Day tradition

In the 1700’s in the colony of Massachusetts, election day was a colony wide holiday. There were cannon firings, military exercises and a procession of government officials to the local church where they listened to the Election Day sermon. In Connecticut, in the early 1800’s, the Election Day Sermon was given in the Assembly before the legislators. For example, the Election Day Sermon in the year 1800 was given by Rev. John Smalley and was titled, “On the Evils of Weak Government.” His text was Isa. 3:4,5 where the prophet recites a curse that would come upon Israel for disobedience.

“I will make mere youths their officials; children will rule over them.”
People will oppress each other—man against man, neighbor against neighbor.
The young will rise up against the old, the nobody against the honored. Isa 3:4-5 NIV

In those days, pastors did not hesitate to relate the truths of the Word of God to their contemporary political situation, at least in Election Day sermons.

## How can we find reconciliation today?

Today, as we celebrate this Fourth of July Sunday at Copper Hill Church, I am going to participate in this old New England tradition and preach a sermon that relates to our contemporary political situation. As you will see, my aim is not to be political, in fact I will try not to be. Rather my aim is to answer the question that everyone is asking, “How can we move past the divisiveness of our era?” “How can we find reconciliation and healing of relationships between people of deeply divided opinion?” This is relevant not just to our political situation. It is relevant also to the United Methodist Church where we find ourselves deeply divided. It is relevant to families where people hold widely divergent opinions. It is relevant to workplaces where the number one reason people leave their jobs is because of their relationship with their boss.

## The example of David and Saul

To find help for our situations today, we go to the story of David and Saul in 1 Samuel 26. Saul was the present king of Israel, but God had rejected him for disobedience. David, who had been Saul’s bravest and most successful military commander, was famous for defeating the Philistine champion Goliath with his shepherd’s slingshot. But David had afterward won many more battles at the head of a contingent of Saul’s troops. In addition, David had been tapped as Saul’s personal harp player, sort of a music therapist to calm Saul’s troubled mind. But at least once, while David played, Saul’s anger and jealousy flared up, and Saul threw a spear at David to kill him (1 Sam. 18:11). Obviously, David had to flee. As David grew more popular with the people of Israel, Saul had grown very jealous and pursued David to kill him. David had fled into the wilderness and had become a wanderer accompanied by a band of adventurer soldiers. The events of 1 Samuel 26 tell about the last skirmish of this type where Saul pursued David to try to kill him. It is very similar in plot line to what happened in 1 Samuel 24. So, what we read about here had been a pattern between Saul and David.

But in this chapter, there is a kind of reconciliation that takes place. Saul stops pursuing David, admits he is wrong, and even gives words of blessing. Admittedly, it is not a full reconciliation as after this incident, David still fled to hide among the Philistines until he heard that Saul had died in battle. Yet what happens in this chapter is still an amazing turn of events. It is an amazing change of relationship between two enemies. Many seeds of reconciliation are sown here.

I believe that if we today will seek to learn from this chapter, we can find great help for our country’s circumstances as well. Deep divisions require that we look and learn from others who have been enemies and have found a measure of reconciliation as David and Saul did in this chapter. We will find what we learn relevant in other situations too.

As I dig into this chapter I find four actions that helped bring reconciliation. These four actions will help us today just as they helped Saul and David.

# Respect for those who rule

The first component that led to healing and reconciliation was David’s solid respect for the one in authority, even though he was his enemy. David looked at Saul and saw the one whom Samuel had anointed as king of Israel years before. In this story, Abishai went into the camp of Saul with David. The opportunity came for Abishai to kill Saul. But David replied,

“Don’t destroy him! Who can lay a hand on the Lord’s anointed and be guiltless?”
1 Sam. 26:9

David called Saul, “The Lord’s anointed.” David used this term of high respect as he ordered Abishai not to lay a hand upon Saul even when the opportunity arose. And this was not the first time. Each time, it was this respect for Saul’s life that opened the way for a measure of reconciliation.

In contrast, today, our political situation gets meaner, and unfortunately even the political situation in church assemblies degrades itself, because of lack of respect. Those of us who have been through multiple US elections realize that the political engine of the United States tends to balance itself like a pendulum. First those on the right are complaining because a president they don’t like has been elected. Then, a few years later, those on the left are complaining because a president they don’t like as been elected. And the cycle continues. Sometimes the flip happens in four years, usually in eight years, occasionally in 12; but it happens. What will be our attitude toward the leader when we are the ones complaining? It’s a good question. Hopefully, it is still respect. It’s one of the reasons I remind us that the Bible teaches us to pray for those who are over us, whichever party they are from, and whether we happen to like them or whether we don’t.

The thing about disrespect is that it breeds disrespect from the other side. And it tends to increase and to degenerate into stronger feelings, even hatred. And that is what we are seeing happen in our world today. So, if we want the cycle to change, it can only change when we grant a measure of respect to those with whom we disagree, even if we disagree deeply. It would be good to remember that the apostle Peter did command us;

Show proper respect to everyone: 1 Peter 2:17 NIV

There is something fundamental and basic about showing respect. We can’t have civil dialogue without it, to say nothing of healing and reconciliation. And if we are hoping for healing and reconciliation, we will need to give respect, even when it may be a stretch, when some would say it was not deserved. Respect is the first building block of reconciliation.

# Willingness to admit wrong

## Both sides working together makes a big difference

The second characteristic that I note, the second action that we need, is performed by King Saul. An interesting part of the structure of this sermon is that two of the actions that contribute to reconciliation are taken by David and two of them by Saul. I think that tells us something. For healing and reconciliation to happen, it’s so much better if both sides are contributing. One person alone can make a difference, but both sides working together can work a miracle!

## Saul’s example

After David’s act of respect becomes known, Saul responds by acknowledging his error.

“I have sinned. Come back, David my son. Because you considered my life precious today, I will not try to harm you again. Surely I have acted like a fool and have been terribly wrong.”
1 Samuel 26:21

## Our challenge

Sad to say, confession of sin is not what we usually see from government and sometimes not from ecclesiastical leaders either. There is something about being a leader that we especially resist saying, “I was wrong.” It’s a hard thing for anyone to do. Parents don’t like to do it either. Children don’t like to do it. None of us like to come right out and say, “I messed up.” It means we have to swallow our pride and admit that we were the one who sinned, who made a mistake, who should have known better.” Yet the Bible teaches us that this kind of humility is extremely healthy.

## We need it

There is no use pretending that we don’t need this kind of humility. We all know better. Every one of us messes up frequently. We say something mean. We neglect to do something that we promised to do. You can fill in the blank regarding something that you have done recently where you messed up. [One word of caution, if you’re the kind of person who easily gets a general feeling of guilt, be sure you can point exactly to what you did. If you just have a general guilty feeling, that is what counselors call false guilt. That’s different. It’s not real it just feels like guilt and usually comes from circumstances and expectations rather than from an actual moral fault. Talk to your pastor about that unsettling fuzzy guilty feeling.] But most of us have plenty of things that are very specific, and we know where we messed up.

Let’s take our relationships for an example. Are we willing to say to our spouse, I’m sorry, I should not have said that, it was wrong?” I have to say that occasionally. I don’t like having to say it. But I know I need to. First because the Bible says to confess our sins to each other so that we can be healed.

Therefore, confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. James 5:16 NIV

Secondly, because it leads to reconciliation with my wife when I have said something grumpy or unloving.

How would relationships between political figures in our country today be changed if people were willing to admit that their words had been mean and apologize. Now that’s a concept! But what might be the result in terms of political goodwill or perhaps the result in similar words from the other side? Who knows where this path might lead?

The practice of confession of fault and the resulting forgiveness that comes is another example of the healthy and peaceful results of the spiritual habits that God teaches us.

# Accountability before God for righteousness and faithfulness

## David’s wise perspective

The third action that I find in this story that can help us on the right road is this one. We need to have the wise perspective of David as he summarizes the events.

“The Lord rewards everyone for their righteousness and faithfulness. 1 Sam 26:23 NIV

There is so much wisdom in this verse.

## We are accountable to God

David is reminding Saul in general that we are all accountable before God. We cannot just press our personal advantage without regard to ethics, without regard for the covenant promises we have made, or without considering the welfare of other people. We are accountable to God. God will require is to give an account. He expects us to live rightly and to be faithful to the commitments that we have made. And a day of judgment is coming. David firmly believed this. He wrote;

One thing God has spoken, two things I have heard:
“Power belongs to you, God, and with you, Lord, is unfailing love”;
and, “You reward everyone according to what they have done.” Ps 62:11-12 NIV

So much would be different in our world today if people had a basic sense that they are accountable to God. One of the issues we are facing in businesses and in government today is a basic lack of honestly and trustworthiness. People are doing what they think they can get away with. We have entered an era in political talk where leaders lie for effect, knowing that some people will believe the lies. It makes no difference that they know it is a lie when they speak it. They are today deliberately trading on the gullibility of people. There are bound to be people who will believe anything. For example, it was in Parade magazine this past week that in 1999, there were 6 % of Americans who actually believed that the Apollo moon landing did not happen. No wonder there are such things as a flat earth society and Sandy Hook deniers.

But, friends, it is immoral to be those who deliberately and knowingly take advantage of the vulnerability of others. Why do people do such things? For short term advantage, to be sure. But they can because they have no concept of a God who holds them responsible. Jesus said that our accountability would extend even to our words.

I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. Matt 12:36 NIV

## God looks deeper than success

But back to the verse that David has given us to ponder.

“The Lord rewards everyone for their righteousness and faithfulness. 1 Sam 26:23 NIV

There is comfort here too. This perspective saves us from the performance trap where we only feel valuable when we are being successful. It’s not that success is bad. It is not and it is good to strive to be successful or fruitful. But it is also great wisdom to realize that success usually depends upon so much more than simply our effort and knowledge. Nearly always there are factors beyond our control or prediction that ether help or hinder what we are trying to do. Sometimes other people make bad decisions that destroy momentum and derail our plans. Maybe they even betray us. We can take great comfort in the fact that God is looking for “righteousness and faithfulness,” not for us to be able to control all the circumstances, not necessarily for us to be a raging success, even though he does hope for fruitfulness from us. But these key words of David tell us the first two kinds of fruitfulness we can offer to God –righteousness and faithfulness. By the word righteousness here, I think David means, our choices to live rightly. [Remember that when you see the word righteousness, in order to understand its meaning in a practical way, try substituting the phrases “right-standing” (with God), and/or “right-living.” Usually one or the other works better. Occasionally either one works in a given context since right-living should be a result of our right-standing with God through the grace of Jesus Christ and the action of the Holy Spirit in us.] The second word, faithfulness, has to do with persistence in doing the right things over time.

## David’s thinking changes our perspective for relationships too

When we have David’s perspective, it changes our relationships too. We can no longer act on the idea, “What can I get away with in this relationship?” For we are accountable to God who sees all. We cannot give up easily when a relationship gets difficult either for we have learned from God the habits of patience and faithfulness. Our ability to be in relationship and stay in relationship is much higher when we remember we are accountable to God, when we are seeking to live rightly, and when we are staying faithful.

# Words that bless

## Words that hurt are common today.

In our political world today, slander, name-calling, and mudslinging seem to be the stock and trade. This verbal battling is a huge contributor to the divisiveness of politics in our era. Somewhere along the line, politicians found out that negative politics works, and sadly few moral compunctions seem to hold them or their back-door allies back from painting unsavory pictures of their foes.

We should all be warned by the fact that when our country’s enemies want to divide us, what tactic do they use? They make slanderous accusations against those that one side admires, knowing that it will inflame passions and cause division. Then they do similarly for the other side. It is a very effective tactic, which prevents healing and reconciliation. Words that wound widen the divides between us.

## Words of blessing confirm the reconciliation

But in the last example in this chapter, Saul gives us a different path. His words come as somewhat of a surprise. But they fall into the story like the refreshing of a summer shower. Saul’s example confirms the amount of healing and reconciliation that can take place when words of healing and blessing replace destructive speech. At the end of the chapter, Saul speaks words of blessing and affirmation for David. Who would have thought as the chapter opened with Saul going out with an army to kill David that the chapter would end with Saul speaking words of blessing for David? It is a miracle of reconciliation!

Then Saul said to David, “May you be blessed, David my son; you will do great things and surely triumph.” 1 Sam 26:25 NIV

This is the capstone of the four steps to reconciliation that are in this chapter. It is what seals the deal. It is what amplifies the result.

Let’s review briefly the four steps.

## Your words of blessing

I am wondering when a measure of peace has come to a troubled relationship of ours, are we willing to speak blessing into that relationship?

Think about when there has been a strain in the parent child relationship due to needed discipline. When the child comes back for reassurance after the discipline, words of blessing from the parent are a wonderful and powerful thing. Tell them what a wonderful child they are. Tell them how much you appreciate them. Let them know how precious they are to you.

When there has been a resolution of a difficult problem at work, is there a chance to say something honest yet affirming? Maybe “It’s been good working together.” Or “I appreciate the fact that you are up-front in your communication.” Or “I look forward to future business.” You get the idea.

Words of blessing do not need to have the word “bless” in them. Often they are more affirmation and well-wishing. But there may also be a time for invoking divine blessing by praying for God to bless another person in some way. The pastor is not the only person who can pray for God to bless someone. You can too.

In fact, Jesus told us to bless even those who curse us (Luke 6:28). The Apostle Peter advised,

Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. 1 Peter 3:9 NIV

We might not naturally think about blessing others in the context of arguing or having a relationship conflict, but the Bible does think of blessing as having a role to play in that context. Honest words of blessing can bring further healing just as Saul’s words did in this story.

As I said at the beginning, we do not get to find out how long this powerful reconciliation lasted because David fled to Philistine territory and before he returned Saul died in battle. But that should not keep us from learning from the powerful example that David and Saul have given us in this chapter, an example that could go a long way to providing some healing to the civil discourse of our country today and help us in our personal lives as well.