

The Economy of God (1 Samuel 15:34-16:13)

Too big to fail. Remember that one after the big financial crash in 2008? It's a banking and finance concept that says that some financial institutions are so large, important, and interconnected that if they appear on the verge of failure, the government must step in financially, or the whole financial system might collapse.

A fascinating concept, don't you think? If you get big enough, we've got no choice but to save your bacon. Troubled banks buy up smaller banks in an effort to get big—too big to let fail. Kind of incentivizes bigness, doesn't it?

But we don't really need any incentive to be big in our culture. If you go to the drive-thru at just about any fast-food restaurant, what's the first question they ask you after you place your order? "Would you like to super-, biggie-, up-size that?"

You know what I'm talking about. It's Father's Day, right? I got the mail only to find a scratch-off card in it that said I'd won ... all I'd have to do would be to go to Sam Swope Honda to claim my prize over the Father's Day weekend. No telling how much I might rake in.

But you know what happens, right? You show up to claim your prize ... no purchase necessary—purchase doesn't enhance chances of winning ... but then somebody with really straight white teeth and an electric smile sees you. And, like a Predator Drone, there's a sudden radar lock on your position.

"What kind of car are you looking for?"

"I'm actually not looking for a car. I'm looking for my prize."

"Well, yes, of course. We'll get that for you in a minute. But as long as you're here ... what kind of car are you driving right now?"

"A 2006 Chrysler minivan."

"How many miles?"

"140,000."

"Wow, that's bound to have been a great car for you! Of course, it's not going to last forever. Have you thought about what you're going to do when that one's no longer serviceable?"

"Not much, no."

"Well, the new Honda Odyssey is a great vehicle. Rides like a dream. Plus, it's got all kinds of room. Much bigger."

And he's off ...

So, I find it easier (and considerably less expensive) to have that conversation in my mind rather than in Sam Swope's parking lot.

But can you hear the assumptions at work?

What you've got is insufficient for your needs. You're going to want something better. Bigger. It's right there—the automatic assumption that if you have a chance to get something bigger and better, you're an idiot to refuse.

The church isn't immune to this way of perceiving the world. It's hard for us to admit out loud, but deep down it's easy to believe that big is always preferable, that big equals success.

Huge churches seem to be the standard against which the rest of us are measured. The flip side's even harder to think about, and it wakes most ministers in the middle of the night in a cold sweat: If big equals success, then small equals failure.

If a church is small, it's because God is displeased with it or because the people it pays to have answers just don't know the mysterious secret. The secret lies hidden like the DaVinci Code somewhere near Roswell, New Mexico.

But no matter how you slice it, small looks like failure in our culture.

It's hard not to think that way. Big can be good. Small isn't necessarily more virtuous.

Ministers face the same temptations as everybody else.

"Attendance is up, giving is up. We just added three new staff, and a hot tub in the family life center. How are things going at your church? Didn't you guys just get a new mimeograph machine? How's that working for you?"

It's hard. Ministers want people to think we're successful, too. We want to go back to our high school reunions with a little spring in

the step, not slinking through a side door and hanging out by the punchbowl, hoping to go unnoticed.

We're conditioned and socialized to see the world through lenses that magnify everything. We often keep score the way everyone else does.

But the story of God's people calls to us, seeking to reorient our vision. God apparently has a different lens through which to view the world and a different method of keeping score.

Take our lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures, for instance. After complaining that God isn't a good enough ruler, the Israelites beg for a king. They see how the world is shaped, and they don't want to be left out. All the other successful countries have a king. God relents, and Samuel becomes the emissary, leading to Saul becoming the first king of Israel.

Saul, however, doesn't live up to God's expectations. In the passage just prior to our text, he disappoints God by refusing to obey God's commandment to execute all the sheep and cattle of the Amalekites ... whom Israel has just defeated in battle.

Instead, Saul saves the best sheep and cattle; and when Samuel calls him on his disobedience, Saul throws up his hands and says, "Hey, I didn't keep them for myself, you understand. I kept them to make a sacrifice to the God of Israel."

Nice try, bub.

God has been disobeyed. So, now, God is determined to find a **new** king—presumably, one who will follow orders—which is how we find ourselves this morning accompanying Samuel to Jesse's house in search of a replacement for Saul.

Frankly, this whole story confuses me a bit. I mean, for the most part, Saul did what God wanted—with the exception of one indiscretion—and Saul won. Right? Ultimately, Saul won. He

routed the Amalekites, which is what God wanted (a troubling picture of God here, I'll grant you). But he cuts a few corners. So what?

I mean, come on! He won, right? Isn't that the final measure of success ... namely, succeeding?

But winners aren't what God's looking for. God wants faithfulness, apparently—not a good box score. Saul's the Jewish Barry Bonds: a little fuzzy on the rules, but still the guy you want batting third down the stretch when the game's on the line. Not God, though. God sends the scouts out in search of a light-hitting utility infielder who'll pay attention to the manager.

How else can we explain Samuel's quest? He shows up, asking to see Jesse's sons. He takes their measure—seven of them—and none of them stack up; which, to be honest, is mystifying. They're all big strapping boys, obvious choices as royal substitutions. Anyone of them should do.

But God revises the requirements of the job description after Samuel checks out the first of Jesse's boys: "Do not look on his appearance or the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (16:7).

Seven times Samuel goes through this kabuki dance, all with the same outcome. Finally, exasperated, Samuel says, "Are you sure this is everybody?"

Jesse says, "Well, there's the kid, but you don't want him. He's out tending the sheep."

"Bring him in. Let's have a look at him."

So, David shows up. He's a good-looking boy—no question. But there's a problem. He's the youngest. And, in a culture that practices primogeniture—that is, the right of the firstborn male to

inherit—the idea of passing over males with claims to seniority is scandalous.

This is line jumping of an outrageous sort. You start letting the youngest climb over their elders and there're going to be big problems. Resentment. Jealousy. The fabric of the social order may not be able to handle this kind of revolutionary show of favor.

How do you think the older brothers must feel being overlooked when they're clearly more qualified?

Apparently, God measures qualifications differently from us.

So, is this story good news or bad news? I guess it depends on where you happen to be standing when you hear it.

If you're at the top of the heap in life, if you've managed to acquire what our culture prizes, or if you're big and successful,

this probably isn't good news. If you already live in a world that lets you take for granted it was created for people who look, think, and act like you, the story the Bible tells is going to sound like a threat.

On the other hand, if you happen to believe that the biggest threat to our lives and livelihoods is people coming here to find a better life and not the economic system and its powerbrokers who exploit them for profit—then this story about little David leapfrogging over those more “qualified” is going to sound troublingly subversive. Again, though, apparently, God keeps score differently from the older brothers.

If you've been used to leftovers your whole life, if you've lived on the margins, if you've always been the last one picked in the game of life, then this story has got to sound pretty good, doesn't it?

If you have to go to the emergency room when your baby gets the flu instead of your family doctor, if you've been told your whole life that the love you share with your beloved is somehow "less than," if the only bailout **you** ever got came at seven o'clock in the morning after a hard night out, then this story about life in the economy of God perhaps carries some promise.

Because in the economy of God, it's the little ones, the forgotten ones, the passed-over ones who wind up at the front of the line. If you read the ancient Hebrew law, meditate on the fiery advocacy for justice of the prophets, or observe the life and ministry of Jesus and his early followers in the young church, you begin to understand that God always seeks out the last, the least, the lost, and the dying—because they're the only ones who know they can't manage life on their own.

In the economy of God, the new creation holds a special place for the powerless, the stepped-on, and the least likely candidates to be social media influencers. In a strange and seemingly

indefensible administrative move, God throws out the HR manual and starts employing the ones who show up to the interview in flip-flops and shorts.

And it's almost never flashy, but it can leave ripples in the pond that seem to go on forever.

Some of you know a young woman at the children's home we go to in Mexico. Betty. She grew up there. Her mother gave her up as an infant because her skin was too dark. Just abandoned her.

I've known her her whole life. She's in her early forties now. She's got a teaching degree and runs her own daycare now.

For years she was the house mother to the little girls that live at Casa Hogar. She had a room just up the hall from the rest of the girls. When somebody was sick in the middle of the night, it was Betty who got woken up.

When one of the new girls felt alone and abandoned, Betty helped her know that she had a home where she was loved and cared for.

When one of the older girls had questions about what it means to be a woman, Betty listened and provided an example.

And they watched her, they respected her because she's been exactly where they are.

Betty Gonzalez is just a young woman who worked in a children's home. Small. Meaningless. Just a drop in the bucket.

Really?

There are dozens of little Mexican girls who say otherwise. They're foolish enough to think she's big, successful.

It all depends on where you're standing, doesn't it?

And here we are, tucked back in behind the bank—just a handful of folks trying to keep body and soul together under the shadow of the big and the successful.

The way I've got it figured, though, this place looks a lot like the kind of place God might choose to do some interesting things.

They may not be big, successful, flashing billboard kinds of things—but then again, we serve a crucified criminal—so that's never been our biggest concern.

In the economy of God, a little bit can go a long way.

-Amen.