

Pat Conover: Peace, Justice and Tribalism

Sermon for Seekers Church

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The story of Deborah calling the men of Israel to war against Sisera and the Canaanites is one of many stories of ongoing war and struggle. For hundred of years after Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt they tried to fight their way into the Promised Land. They were repeatedly rebuffed and we have the long litany of enemies. Even after they had crossed the Jordan and defeated Jericho, they were still mostly confined to the hills as herders and unable to overcome the Canaanites who had iron and horses. As part of the story of the victory of the Israelites in this particular fight, we get the story of Jael, one of several "crafty peasant" stories in Hebrew scripture. Sisera is fleeing after being defeated and Jael welcomes him into her tent, covers him with a rug, supposedly to hide him, and, when he goes to sleep, kills him by hammering a tent peg into his head.

The contributions of Deborah included sending out the call to war, shaming Barak into leading the fight, and picking a strategy that maximized the advantage of hill tribesmen versus chariots. We also learn again from this story that Israel was a loose confederation of tribes that were spread out as was appropriate for herders that needed pasture and water for their animals.

The history books of Hebrew scripture abound with war, intrigue, betrayal and judgment. They are not very pretty

stories, for the most part. Moreover, it is not a very pretty picture of God; a picture of a God who favors the Israelites over other tribes, supports genocide and supports an anything goes approach to winning wars.

I was particularly troubled as a teenager by First Samuel 15: 2-3.

“This is the very word of the Lord of Hosts; I shall punish the Amalekites for what they did to Israel, when they opposed them on their way up from Egypt. Go now, fall upon the Amalekites, destroy them and put their property under ban. Spare no one. Put them all to death, men and women, children and babes in arms, herds and flocks, camels and donkeys.”

This military name for God, “Lord of Hosts,” and the proclaiming of blood feud and genocide, has nothing redeeming about it.

There was not anything very special about the claims of the Israelites. They were just nomads with their herds and they were fighting for water and living space. The sin of the Amalekites, and of Sisera and the Canaanites, was that they controlled the water and had the land resources the Israelites wanted.

The religious justification for these wars was, according to the Israelites, that they worshiped the true God while the other tribes did not.

I give you Bob Dylan as the voice of prophecy against such thinking.

*“Oh the history books tell it,
they tell it so well.
The cavalry charged and the Indians fell.
The cavalry charged and the Indians died.
Now the cavalry too had God on their side.”*

How could something good come out of this tribalism, this self-serving claim of a special relationship with God that justified the craftiness and genocide of the Israelites while condemning the craftiness and genocide of the other tribes? This looks far more like the work of the devil than the work of God.

This is a good place in this sermon for a rant about the tribalism of the United States. We might bring up the assaults of European settlers and the decline of Native Americans, the contrast of civilized to savage, the practice of scalping introduced by the British as the basis of payment for varmint extermination. Maybe I should mention the Monroe doctrine and the concept of manifest destiny. Closer to home, I should point out our claim to the right to have weapons of mass destruction and our history of using them, or to our support for Saddam Hussein in his war against Iran. It is a good rant but I think I will save it for another sermon.

Instead, I am going to work with the question of how anything good could come out of Israel. Where is there any good news in these centuries of constant warfare? The answer does not justify the claims of political Zionism that arose from the sensing that the people of Israel were specially chosen, not then and not now.

I do believe that the Israelites were a chosen people, just not a specially chosen people. They were just one of the tribes that were working out their feelings of having a close or special relationship to God. The reality we are dealing with here is the same reality we in Seekers talk about as calling. Over the centuries, the Israelites recognized that they were called to service and sacrifice rather than to domination, pride and arrogance. That is the existential power of the real ending of Job that was destroyed by the editor who prettied-up the story and made things come out all right. It is in the crying out of Lamentations and of Psalm 90, which is part of our lectionary today. In addition, it is most

beautifully put in Isaiah 42.

Different tribes of the world carried different founding stories. Israel carried two deeply contrasting lines of stories. One of the stories is the line of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the identification of God's covenant with a particular bloodline, a theme repeated in the stories of empire with Saul, David and Solomon, and echoed in the genealogies of Matthew and the dreams of apocalypse. The contrary line of stories begins with Moses and the discovery of the law, the recognition that law applies to all; and continues in the prophets who criticized the arrogance and evil of the kings, in the learnings of exile that calling and covenant does not depend on the lust for power or the having of power. It continues not in the Maccabees and the Zealots of Jesus' time, but in John the Baptist and then Jesus. In the parable of the talents, which is part of the lectionary today, we are told we are accountable for what we do with our gifts and talents, not free to use them any way we want. It grows further in the New Testament in the vision of the heavenly feast in Paul, in the conversion and mystical poetry of Paul, and especially in Paul's outreach to the Gentiles.

It would be too cheap and too easy to affirm the universal line of stories and to decry the tribal line of stories. I do believe that one of the most powerful themes in the Bible is the movement from tribalism to universalism, the triumph of justice for all embedded in the concept of human rights and defended by law. It is a good story, but too simple a story.

We cannot claim a commitment to Jesus, a commitment to the law, a commitment to principles of justice and human rights, a commitment to fairness and sharing, as if we were somehow living in some essential plane that floats above the engagement in strife and privilege and competition. Deborah was not merely a warlord and strategist. She was also a priestess and a judge, a source of religious inspiration and a source of justice.

This is a good place in the sermon for a rant about how we are all complex people, about how there is some good in the worst of us and some bad in the best of us. It is also a good place for a humility rant about taking the log out of our own eyes before we engage in unilateral preemptive strikes to take the speck out of the eyes of our neighbor. These are good rants, but at this point I am reminded of Mark Twain's comment on the music of Wagner. He said, "The music of Wagner is better than it sounds."

Instead, I want to talk about needing you, about the ways we need each other, not theoretical need, but immediate and practical need. I needed the support my parents gave me as a child and the stories they carried that originally helped me to locate my place in the world. Now I need you. I need you in practical ways, like helping me produce my book and the help I am getting with the website, www.peaceprayer.org. I need you for riding bikes, for criticism and correction, and for love.

Love is a great principle but I am not a disembodied spirit. I need eye contact and hugs. I need partners for shared work. I needed you to walk with me when I was recovering from surgery. I need you to not merely tolerate me, but to accept me as a transgender person. Moreover, I give back love and commitment and work in ways I do not share with just anyone. I need the loyalty that is based in joined stories and not merely objective commitments. I cannot help it. I do not want to change it. I am a tribal person and I need the support of my tribe.

I cannot become transformed by myself. I need my tribe to transform with me. I need my tribe to know that it is a justice and peace tribe, a generous tribe and not a selfish tribe, a service tribe. Without my tribe, how can I take on the powers and principalities? Without my tribe, how can any of the things I care about become more than fantasy. Without my tribe, where would I leave the little residues of my accomplishments? Without my tribe, who would notice that I am

trying? Who would notice when I am missing?

We need to do our inner work, to build this community, to offer service outward to others. That is not enough. We need to be a transforming tribe that creates a place in a very dangerous world. I've been beat up enough, cheated to often, oppressed in very immediate and practical ways, to pretend I can do very much just by using the gifts and strengths God has given me. As my friend, Bill Baird used to say, "Blessing and curse is the same thing." Our phrases about solidarity with the poor and working to end all wars are precious and we need to make them more lively and resonant among us. However, I find our commitment to work for systemic change in the everyday circumstances of our lives, including the valuation of citizenship, even more precious.

In the tradition of Paul, we have named ourselves an open tribe and that means we are open to change and growth as new people come to us. More importantly, we need to treasure the diversities we have among ourselves so that we can have conversations that are more constructive because different ones of us carry different elements of the truth. We are an educated bunch with highly diverse experiences of the world. I am convinced that among us, though still dimly seen, we carry far more understanding of the kairos moment of change in our world than we have shared. I quote to you from the Thessalonians part of our lectionary reading for today.

"But you, friends, are not in the dark; the day will not come upon you like a thief. You are children of the light, children of the day."

We need to know ourselves as a tribe that welcomes the light, which wants to wake up. We are Seekers. Above all, this means we must not only create safe space for diversity, but also actually have the conversations that learn from each other and deepen the covenant beyond mere points of view. Conversation must not be merely about defending our opinions. Neither can

we settle for the cheap tolerance, the cheap grace, of stopping the deeper probing by saying that anyone's opinion is as good as any other. What we must come to say is that each member of tribe is precious and that we treasure what we have to learn from each other.

This is not so easy in practice because some of us, and I will not name names here, are a bit passionate about our beliefs, are deeply invested in our world views and priorities. This is going to get hot some time. Nevertheless, we know we need the truth, for we are children of the day. We know we need our tribe to sustain us in our vulnerability as we deal with unpleasant aspects of the truth, and as we risk in the world in pursuit of systemic change.

I remember what it was like as a teenager to feel I had no tribe, to feel everyday danger. I remember carrying a sawed off shotgun in my trunk because I was afraid of the police in Tallahassee. I remember a fellow Christian activist in Chicago who was set up by the Chicago Police with a faked drug bust. I remember having my phone tapped by the Chicago Police Red Squad or the FBI. Back then, you could hear the clicks. I remember that the FBI broke into my mother-in-law's high school English Class to question her in front of her students as to whether she thought I was a Communist. I remember losing jobs and careers because I risked for my faith. In addition, I remember being on the wrong side of a gun three times in Chicago and having my family threatened with violence soon after a neighbor was killed and dismembered and put in a garbage can. I remember when our Boy Scout leader was shot between the eyes by a Blackstone Ranger.

I know I need a tribe. Moreover, I have some sympathy for the Israelite tribes that were threatened for survival on every side; they had to move their flocks to survive when all the other good locations, the good water supplies, were already claimed. The blood feud's were not justified, nor the arrogance, nor the hatred. However, they were understandable.

They needed to do better. Over the centuries, the stories they carried help them do better.

Our privilege is understandable. We cannot extract ourselves from the compromised situation we live in without giving up responsibility for making things better. The issue is not purity but engagement, not perfection but giving away our gifts, not so much claiming the truth as claiming a commitment to the truth.

So let us risk a little more with each other. Let us make a commitment to justice and peace as much a part of our identity as our commitment to service and ministry. Let us take on more of the conversations that let us know we mean some of these good words. The most pressing conversation at the moment is whether we want to join our tribe to the larger United States tribe for a war on Iraq, to share the guilt for killing thousands of Iraqi's, perhaps hundreds of thousands as we did in Desert Storm and through the sanctions. It is too cheap to simply oppose the war in Iraq and think that gives us a clear conscience. Moreover, it is too cheap to support the war and hope that the end will justify the means.

From Psalm 90:

*God, you are our refuge in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth,
or the earth and the world were born,
from age to age, You are God.*

We can embody that... Imperfectly.