

## It's Up to All of Us

Throughout the Old Testament, the call to be different is perhaps the central call for the Israelite people. So much of the law is given with the goal of differentiating the Israelites from the people around them. They are not supposed to be like the other nations. And the reason for this has everything to do with what they experienced as slaves in Egypt. When God led the people out of slavery into freedom, God's hope wasn't they would create another society of inequality and oppression, only with their king on top. Rather, God wanted them to build a completely different society – one that is based on a biblical concept called shalom which is basically translated as peace with justice. The law was given to help create the conditions where shalom might be possible.

Today, it's easy to think of the commandments in the Bible as individual commandments. But that's not really the intent. They were meant to be the commandments for a community, a safeguard against becoming a society like what they experienced in Egypt.

So, for example...

In Egypt, Pharaoh was like God, but the Israelites are called to be different. No human is God. Only God is God. If a human is seen as God or with God-like power, then he can do whatever he wants to other humans. But if no human is God, then no human has the right to oppress.

In Egypt, the Israelites had to work every day as slaves, but the Israelites are called to be different. So they kept the Sabbath because everybody and everything deserves time to rest. In fact, even the land gets to rest in the new society they were building.

In Egypt, the rich got richer and the slaves had nothing, but the Israelites are called to be different. So throughout God's law, they were commanded to care for the poor and the immigrant and the refugee.

In Egypt, power was concentrated in the hands of a single individual, but the Israelites are called to be different. They were led by prophets and priests who helped the people follow the way of God. Power was shared.

But being different is hard. Throughout the Old Testament, the people are often tempted to be like the nations around them. And that's what we see in our Scripture today. The people wanted a king and part of their reason was so they could "be like other nations."

And Samuel, the priest, was not happy about it. Now this is the same Samuel we talked about last week who, as a small child, heard the voice of God telling him that Eli, the old priest, along with his sons were no longer able to serve as priests. Samuel became the new priest and he led Israel well. He helped them remember who God was calling them to be. He helped them lean into being different. But he was old. And the people were beginning to imagine a life without Samuel there to guide them. And instead of trusting that God would raise up a new priestly leader, the people decided that being different, in this case, was just too hard. They wanted a king so they could be like other nations.

And God says, “ok...if that’s what the people want, ok.” But God also said to Samuel, “Give them a king, but first warn them about what kings, what people with absolute power do.” And Samuel did. This is what he said: “The king will force your sons to be in his army and to work his field. He will make your daughters be his cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your harvest for himself. He will even make you into slaves.”

And that’s exactly what would go on to happen. Saul became Israel’s first king. Then after Saul, it was King David. And then after David, Solomon became king. And this is what happened: Solomon forced some of the Israelite people to be slaves to, of all things, build a new temple for God, something God never asked for or wanted.

So notice what happened. In just three generations after the people asked for a king, they were no longer different than what they left in Egypt. Their society of shalom had turned into a society of slavery – the very thing they had left behind. Samuel’s warning about the king turned out to be prophetic.

And here’s the thing, it’s easy to criticize the people as simply rebelling against God. But I’m not sure that’s fair. I told you that part of their reasoning for wanting a king was to be like the other nations. But that was only part of the reason. The other reason is that there was no obvious heir to the work Samuel did. In fact, Samuel’s sons, who would have been his natural successors as priests were not only not up to the task but instead were taking advantage of their position for their own personal gain. The Scripture says, “His sons did not follow in his ways but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice.”

Being a community of shalom and justice and equality is hard and it requires trust, but trust had been violated. And instead of doing the long, and hard, and maybe even seemingly impossible work of rebuilding trust, of finding new leadership, of continuing the way of shalom, the people took the easy way. They asked for a king. They wanted someone to just tell them what to do.

And I think that is such an important lesson for us. We live in a time when more and more it feels like so many of our institutions that provided stability are falling apart. Or, if they’re not falling apart, they at least don’t make us feel as stable, as secure as they once did. And I think this is true on multiple levels – whether we’re talking about government or the institutional church, or our academic institutions, or so many other places. And when we find ourselves in that place, it is so tempting to look for an easy, singular solution:

- We need a strong man to save us – a king like figure.
- Or we need to purify our institutions with litmus tests and only have people who think just like us.
- Or we talk about “those people” on social media or even shout at them at public meetings instead of doing the hard work of building relationships and finding common ground.
- Or we give up on the great vision of the common good, of peace with justice and equality, altogether and succumb to cynicism.

Like the Israelite people thousands of years ago, I think we're in a similar situation. And just like there was no obvious leader to follow Samuel to help lead them, I'm not sure we have an obvious leader either.

And even if we did, there are many dangers in placing our hopes in charismatic leaders—it reinforces the dominant hierarchies, too many of our charismatic leaders end up failing us, and we can turn the organization into a cult of personality that overshadows the actual mission—but maybe the most important danger in trusting in a sole leader, even a good one, is that we forget we all have the responsibility to build the world, to build the town, to build the church we hope to be a part of.

In Scripture, we see that trusting in a single leader is a dangerous proposition.

Solomon's failure led to another Civil War that forever divided ancient Israel.

Even King David, Israel's greatest king, had immense failures that did great harm to the people.

But there's another story of how to live into God's vision for the world that also weaves throughout our Scripture. After settling into the Promised Land, the people relied on decentralized Judges where even a woman finds her place in leadership, something unheard of in that day and time in a patriarchal society. There's the story we've been reading of Samuel who, speaking for God, begged the people to not place their trust in a king. And then there's this story of Jesus in the Gospel of John. After he fed the crowds with only five loaves of bread and two fish, the people wanted to make him their king. And Jesus ran away.

If I were in the crowd after Jesus had just fed the multitudes, I might want Jesus to be king too. I would probably say something like, "Think of how much good you could do. Think of how many people you could impact. Think of all the people you could heal, all the people you could feed." But it seems like for Jesus, all the good in the world couldn't undo the harm of being a king-like leader, of being a leader like Herod, or like Pharaoh, or like Caesar.

But I get why we keep trying to change the world that way. It's so much easier to think that all we need to do is just find the right person, then things will change. The charismatic leader gives us a personality we can follow. It gives us a decision maker so we don't have to do the hard work of building consensus. It gives us comfort in knowing that the leader's working on it, so we don't have to. But of all the things a cult of personality gives us, it usually doesn't give us the change we truly need.

That change takes all of us.

It's about small communities like us saying that we won't wait for our elected official to solve the refugee crisis but we will open our doors and host people when we can. We will make sure kids have fun and a place to get a good meal. We can't solve the whole problem, but we can do something.

It's about small communities like East Church hearing about a local elementary school that doesn't have a library and instead of waiting for the school committee to act, they create a library for them and then go volunteer each week to read to the kids. They can't solve the whole problem, but they can and have done something.

In a world that so often feels like it is falling apart, I believe it is small communities like our two churches choosing to do what we can to make a difference that truly matters. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying who our leaders are don't matter. We all should vote – in fact that's one way we take responsibility for building the world we want. But what I am saying is that our work to build the world, the town, and the church we want is about far more than who our leaders are. It's about all of us recognizing that if we work together, if we find common ground, if we live out our values, then we don't need to wait on a leader to save us. We can begin that work ourselves.

So perhaps we need to heed Samuel's warning and take a cue from Jesus so that we might recognize that to truly make this world what we want it to be, we have to do the hard, messy work of consensus building, power sharing, and taking collective responsibility. We have to always remember that the vision of the world we hope to build is what we must elevate and not an individual person. And we have to remember if a world of justice, peace, and equality has any hope of emerging, then the means by which we seek to build this new world must be consistent with the world we hope to bring about. Friends, this work is about all of us taking responsibility for it and doing it together as a faith community.

And I have to tell you, I am so excited to do continue doing this work alongside you, the people of First Congregational Church of Milton.