

Paying the Price
October 30, 2016
I Samuel 20:24-42; Luke 14:25-27
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
Pastor Dave Carver

This was an endorsement that not many people saw coming. I'm not talking about Angelina Jolie's decision to become a spokesperson for Louis Vuitton or any of the celebrities that are lining up behind one of the contenders for political office in 2016. We could see most of those coming, and frankly, we're a little tired of all the commercials.



¹But the one we just heard about – now *that* was a shocker. Who saw *this* coming? Jonathan... that would be *Prince* Jonathan, the son of King Saul of Israel, comes to the man that his father hates more than anyone else, David the son of Jesse, and says, “Look... No matter what happens, I'm with you.” In fact, a couple of verses prior to the beginning of our reading for the day, we hear him say, “May the Lord call David's enemies to account.’ And Jonathan had David reaffirm his oath out of love for him, because he loved him as he loved himself.” (I Samuel 20:16-17).

Wow! The son of the king – the man who was next in line for the throne – says, “David, I want you to succeed. God is clearly with you, and you've got to do this thing.” Who saw that coming?

¹ *David and Jonathan*, Gustav Doré (1843)

Of course, Jonathan wasn't the first one in his family to sense David's ascendancy. Last week we read about his sister, Michal... *Princess* Michal, who warned David as her father tried to have him killed, thus keeping him alive so that he'd be free to live into the promised future that God had laid out for him. Today's reading is simply a description of another child of Saul moving toward David.

But note how he does this. This is not a public endorsement intended for the newspapers or television camera. Instead, it is a deeply personal and private conversation in which Jonathan seeks to confirm for David all of the things that old Samuel had told the boy so many years before... before the Philistine wars... before the battle with Goliath... before all the conflicts with Saul, and before the wedding to Saul's daughter... On this moonlight night at the shooting range, Jonathan pulls David aside and says, "Look, David, you have got to see this through."

Eugene Peterson puts it this way:

Without Jonathan, David was at risk of either abandoning his vocation and returning to the simple life of tending sheep or developing a murderous spirit of retaliation to get even with the man who despising the best that was

within him. He did nether. He accepted Jonathan's friendship and in receiving it received confirmation of Samuel's earlier anointing to kingwork and the God-dominated imagination that made it possible to live in and by God's Spirit in song and story.²

In short, for the second week in a row, we have a child of King Saul saving the life of the man who would replace him – knowing that in the eyes of the world, Jonathan is acting against his own best interests. There is something deeply admirable about Jonathan's behavior and principles here. I wonder how Jonathan got to be this kind of a human being – the kind of man who is able to look not only to his own interests, but to the greater good; a man who is eager to sense how and where and when God is moving and to share in that, even if it brings him to a place of disruption or personal pain. I don't know about you, but I'd like to be a person like that.

But how? How do I grow into having that kind of persona?

I think it starts with learning how to say "no", and perhaps more precisely, knowing what to say "no" to.

Don't get me wrong: I'm sure that Jonathan's enthusiastic

² *Leap Over A Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians*, HarperCollins 1997, p. 54-55.

embrace of David is due, at least in part, to something amazingly wonderful and captivating about David. This is a special, special kid, and you'd have to be willfully ignorant to miss that.

But Jonathan's actions here are more than merely looking at David's amazing gifts and affirming them. He invests himself deeply in David's life, and the only way that is possible is because Jonathan is willing to train himself to say "no" to some parts of this world that have a deep attraction for him. In the space that those denials provide him, he is able to add his emphatic "yes" to God's future in the life of his friend David.

Our reading for this morning offers us a glimpse into a conversion of sorts. At the beginning of chapter 20, Jonathan is trying hard to be both a dutiful son and a good friend. Saul's behavior – including the attempted murder of this dutiful son in a fit of rage – drives Jonathan to the place where he expresses his desire to follow David, not Saul, into an uncertain future. As Jonathan expresses his loyalty to David, he is living into the words of Jesus in Luke 14: ""If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple."

In our culture, we often think of the word "hate" as the opposite of the word "love". When we say "I love *NCIS* but I sure do hate *Jeopardy*", we are saying that we have an attraction toward police drama and are repulsed by quiz shows. In the Semitic world, however, the meaning was a little bit different. To "hate" someone or something was to turn away from it or to detach oneself from it. When Jesus called his followers, he was inviting them to turn away from any allegiances that would stand in the way of their full-time discipleship and to love him more than anyone or anything else.

As Jonathan came to see what was going on in his own household, including the mad ambition, the spiritual depravity, and the murderous jealousy of his father, he had to "hate" that. He had to turn himself away from those things and detach himself from that kind of a heritage. And because he turned his back on those things, he was able to embrace the thing that God was doing in David. Jonathan confirmed God's call on David's life and he pledged himself to helping David realize the totality of that call.

And 700 years or so later, Jesus, the Son of David, finds himself marching toward Jerusalem in the last months of his

life. He knows that he is walking towards his death, the great sacrifice for the sake of the world. Jesus has challenged the status quo, he has stood up to religious charlatans who were eager to jump into bed with the Empire, and he has sought to proclaim the outrageous love and grace of God. Jesus knows exactly where he is heading, and he knows exactly what will happen to him when he gets there. And as he keeps marching, he turns around and seems surprised that there is a crowd behind him.

He speaks: "Are you all sure about this? Do you *know* where this trip ends? Don't come with me unless you know where we're headed. Following me means turning away from what you have held most dear. Saying 'Yes' to the movement of God and the rule of the Spirit means saying 'No' to unhealthy habits, long-cherished notions, and a life centered on pleasing yourself."

And those words of the Savior are not only for that crowd 2000 years ago. They are for us. How do we learn from Jonathan? How do we follow the Savior? Where do we need to say "no" so that our "yes" will mean something?

Some of us need to unplug. That is to say, we need to dial back on the devices that are seeking to control us or are

having an unhealthy impact on us. That could mean cutting down on your investment in social media. We are so transfixed by what happens in this little alternate reality that we become unable to function in the real plane of our existence. We check our feeds, we wait for our followers to react, and we have alerts sent to remind us when someone we love or loathe does something to bless or irritate us. As a result, we find that we are more antagonistic, our blood pressure rises, we're more irritable, and we are so concerned with the virtual world that we find it hard to be attentive to the actual world that is in front of our noses. I have friends who have deactivated Facebook because it's taken them to places they don't want to go; there are those who find that the anonymity and immediacy of Twitter means that it's far too easy to become vile and hateful; and still others among us are so tethered to our email that we have to check it six or eight times an hour. And maybe you scoff at all of these technologies but at the same time can't wait to turn on the talk radio or get to your favorite cable news station...which, in fact, do the same things to you. Some of us need to unplug.

And speaking of plugging, there are those among us who might actually be helped by getting a little better connected. That is to say it may be that the current cesspool of cyberspace

in which you're trapped may be online pornography or gambling. If that's the case, then let me encourage you to upgrade to Snapchat or Pinterest as possible alternatives to the fantasy world in which you are immersing yourself. As I've already noted, these platforms are not without their flaws, but at least they'd be a step closer to real relationships with real people.

In addition to unplugging, perhaps we all need to just simmer down a little bit. That's what my grandmother would say to me when I was getting a little too high on my horse. Actually, I'm not at all sure what she meant by me being high on my horse, but "simmer down" was grandma's way of saying "chill." Is it me, or do so many people seem to be so angry so much of the time? Every time you turn around, someone is about to bite your head off... Anger comes from fear: Psychologists tell us that when we are threatened, our natural instincts are to fight or to flee. Anger is half of that equation. I fall in love with my ideas, and when I discover that your ideas are different, I want to argue with you about it. I'm afraid of loss of identity or purpose or integrity; I'm afraid of some threat to my way of life, and rather than acknowledging all of that, I simply call you an idiot, get angry at you, and walk away.

You don't have to watch too many political ads to see this at work in our lives today, do you? And it's even worse when we see that getting played out in the church. I have some friends on the left who take some interesting ideas about social justice and fairness and equality and give them a quick baptism and proclaim that Jesus is here, and only here.

On the other hand, I have some friends on the right who start with some deeply held beliefs about God and country and patriotism, and frame those with an appeal to the founding of our so-called "Christian nation" and America as the promised land and pretty soon opposing any of those ideas is the same thing as turning one's back on God.

And yet to all of my friends I would say, "Relax. Simmer down. Jesus isn't running for President. And he wasn't in the primaries, either." You have your ideas. Great. Vote, of course. Express your opinions – but do all of that thinking, voting, and expressing *after* you've spent time on your knees, waiting in prayer, asking God where God is already moving in the world.

And with the energy and equilibrium that we gain when we unplug and simmer down, perhaps then we will find ourselves in a position to dive in somewhere and make a

promise to someone. Eugene Peterson calls us to be Jonathans in the lives of people around us. Listen:

Each of us has contact with hundreds of people...who take one look at us, make a snap judgment, and then slot us into a category so that they won't have to deal with us as persons. They treat us as something less than we are; and if we're in constant association with them, we *become* less.

And then someone enters our life who isn't looking for someone to use, is leisurely enough to find out what's really going on in us, is secure enough not to exploit our weaknesses or attack our strengths, recognizes our inner life and understands the difficulty of living out our inner convictions, confirms what's deepest within us. A friend. It's a great thing to be a Jonathan.³

He's right, of course. But the only way that we are able to be strong enough to do that is when we detach ourselves from our anger, our fears, or our unhealthy addictions to people, substances, or attitudes.

Or make a promise in a different way: demonstrate your intention to walk in a new path by making a profound promise

³ *Leap Over A Wall*, p. 54.

to commit to giving more of your money to the Lord's work in the year to come. Too many of us "lowball" it when we come around to thinking about what we'd like to give. We think about what might be a comfortable gift, and then we back off that a little bit and make our promise. What if we led with our best and deepest hopes and then spent the year trying to live into that?

Or maybe your deal isn't really money: it's time. Maybe you can make a promise to really endorse someone by simply showing up... again and again. Come in in for the After School program... or be a mentor... or volunteer at The Table.

I realize that none of these things – not service hours, not financial donations, not presence with others – none of these things are the goal. Yet each of them are concrete, active ways to move toward the goal: following Jesus. Letting go of the things that hold us back and detaching ourselves from unhealthy patterns free us to pick up new practices that enable us to grow into the kinds of people who can walk with Jesus on the path to self-sacrifice, humility, and ultimately, resurrection.

I really, really wanted this sermon to be about the virtues of friendship and what an admirable and all-around nice guy

Jonathan was. But the text doesn't lead us there. Instead, it challenges us to consider whether we are willing to let go of anything - whether it's anger or politics or bitterness or pornography or popularity or public esteem – that would encumber us on our walk with Jesus. We pray that we might be released to see the new hope and purpose that comes in the power of God in person of Jesus. Jonathan saw God at work and let go of some of his deeply held dreams and beliefs. The first followers of Jesus discerned the movement of God's spirit among them and let go of some long-held allegiances in order to move with the Lord. What in us needs to change if we are to become more faithful disciples? Help us to see that, Lord, and then help us to do it. Amen.