

Standing Between

A sermon by Bruce C. Birch

1 Samuel 25:1-44; Matthew 5:1-11

It is wonderful to be back at Southwestern and at Grace Church.

This is where a lot of the vocational direction that has shaped my life was formed
The Methodist Student Movement often met in the basement of this church
and was an important part of moving me toward seminary and ministry

But along with the enjoyable events of Homecoming and class reunion it is hard to forget
that we gather here only weeks away from a presidential election

But it is a troubling political year

Public opinion is deeply divided

Both the electorate and our political institutions have been characterized
as severely polarized

We are deluged by negative ads and expressions of intolerance for those of other
views

There have even been instances of violence over these views

Further, many places in our world are also characterized by polarized divisions,
intolerance, and even armed conflict

Unfortunately this is not new

In the fall of my junior year at Southwestern John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon
were running for President

The MSM sponsored a forum in the basement here at Grace on the
different opinions about whether we should elect a Roman
Catholic as president

When the speaker was announced to speak for JFK and to argue that
his RC background should not make a difference an entire group
of students booed, got up, and walked out

My friend Mike Alexander, who was from a RC background, was active in
a small embattled Young Democrats group on campus and he was
roughed up a bit by a group of fellow student who objected to his
viewpoint.

Well, as we all know, JFK was elected and a few weeks later Dave Dolson, Merwin
Mitchell, Martisse Conaway, and I arrived in Washington for the Washington Semester
and watched the New Frontier administration take shape. I got there a few days early and
stood in the snow to watch him take the inaugural oath

But less than two years later I was in seminary at Perkins School of Theology in

Dallas, TX I went with friends one day to watch the arrival of President John F.
Kennedy and wave as he left Air Force One and began his motorcade

I was in systematic theology class when the terrible news was announced that he
 had been shot
 And that night my wife, who was a school teacher, told me that
 schoolchildren throughout her building had cheered when the news was
 announced
 In the time I was still in graduate school Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert
 Kennedy were also shot and killed

Division, intolerance, even violence are not new, but for that reason the Christian
 vocation of witnessing to another reality in the midst of division is always needed
 That's what we are here for
 As the church, we are a community of God's people that offer a better way
 to live in the world; an alternative way of being and doing
 A way that respects differences and finds ways to live cooperatively
 together; a way of standing between the extremes
 This is the way characterized by Jesus in his ministry
 Associating with all kinds of people, accepting them all, and
 inviting them into a life of love, not hate and division

I grew up in the church and in a church going family
 But I was not very well prepared for a ministry of standing between
 I grew up in Wichita and my home church largely ignored political questions
 This may have been easier here in Kansas because I was in
 high school before I fully realized there were two political parties
 I may have heard of Democrats but I wasn't sure I knew one
 In my family we didn't talk about politics
 I didn't fully appreciate the family and cultural pressure to conform and
 not talk about it until after my father died
 I called up my mother several months after his death to see how she was
 doing
 She said that she often missed him greatly, but she also said, "You know
 it's the first time I've lived on my own for over 50 years, and
 there's a certain amount of freedom that comes with that too."
 "So, I've dyed my hair and registered as a Democrat."

The church I grew up in in Wichita gave me many gifts that nourished my faith
 But it did not help me much with faith lived in a politically polarized world
 I think it was here in Winfield that I began to learn that
 From wise and knowledgeable teachers like Robert Kysar, Wallace Gray,
 and Garry Hays
 From classmates who have gone on to become leaders in every walk of
 Life
 From an ethos that welcomed difference and nourished discussion and
 taught respect
 And the ministry of the church in our time cannot be a ministry with no voice
 in the most critical issues of our day
 But how do we speak with moral clarity and avoid ideological simplicity?

How do we honor and respect all persons even when we disagree?
 How can we seek community rather than victory?

I think there might be some clues for us in the story of Abigail that was read as part of today's scripture lesson

Abigail is a wonderful biblical example of someone with intelligence and courage who stood between two opposing viewpoints and courses of action, both of which would lead to disaster.

In her actions and words she made a new reality possible

In 1 Samuel 25 we are first introduced to Nabal, a very rich owner of land and flocks in Judah

We should be alerted by his name; it means "fool"

But we are further told that he is surly and mean

As his actions will prove he is self serving and lacking in hospitality and generosity

It is shearing time for Nabal's sheep and this is a time of celebration and feasting

Then there is David; we already know him in the story of 1 Samuel

His name may mean "beloved" and he is "the man after God's own heart,"
 God's anointed one

At this point in the story he is a fugitive from the jealousy of King Saul

He and his 600 men have been hiding in hill country near Nabal's flocks

Even Nabal's own shepherds later tell Abigail enthusiastically that David's men have protected their flocks from wild beasts and thieves so that not one lamb has been lost

David sends ten men to ask on a feast day for Nabal to share some provision of food with his men

They address Nabal 3x with "peace"; they call themselves Nabal's servants

It is a traditional time of hospitality

But Nabal treats them with contempt

He claims David is a nobody; no better than an escaped slave

Now at this point we might think the story is clear; there's a good guy and a bad guy

A fool and a beloved

But the story goes on

David reacts to the report of his men with anger

He had his men strap on swords and he sets out with 400 of them

He vows to leave no male alive in all of Nabal's household because the fool has returned evil for good.

Here is the problem, in David's time and in our own

Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between the self-centered fool and the
 hotheaded righteous
 They both set courses that lead to division, suffering and destruction of
 community
 They stand at the extremes of individualistic entitlement and self righteous over
 reaction

The story is headed for a no win disaster
 But the difference is Abigail

She is introduced to us as intelligent and beautiful and it is telling that when the
 shepherds realize that David is bent on vengeance they come to her and
 not to Nabal

She gathers ample provisions on donkeys and rushes to intercept David on the
 road

When she meets David she bows before him but what is remarkable is her speech
 Here she becomes both David's teacher and our own

1. From the very beginning of her speech she poses the issues in terms of what God is
 doing and how David's actions (and our own) must serve what God intends

Those who would serve God cannot afford to speak and act first and then ask
 after God's will

Even a fool is not fair game for self righteous violence—of deed or word

God will allow the fool's own folly to reap its consequences

But God's purposes are larger than the impulses of the moment

David cannot become God's intended king and be seen as a man who
 returns folly for folly

2. Secondly, Abigail rightly sees that power and responsibility cannot be placed into the
 hands of those who have blood on their own hands.

Twice David spares the life of Saul who vows to kill him out of jealousy and
 anger

And now David would slaughter a fool and his entire household and come to the
 throne with bloody hands

Then as now, people of faith like Abigail, dare to ask a higher standard of those in
 whom power and authority is entrusted

We should like Abigail be voices against returning foolish mean
 spiritedness with our own dirty tricks

Like Abigail we demand respect and engagement to resolve differences

Like Abigail we trust to the Lord at work in all of life and seek to align
 ourselves with that work

Compassion and not vengeance

Engagement and not superiority

Respect and not caricature

Abigail refused to stand by and simply accept the unfolding disastrous events

She believed God wanted her to make a difference

To make a different reality possible

In my Senior year at SC I found myself in a Helen Graham production of King Lear wandering the moors with Mike Alexander as a mad King Lear and myself as Lear's fool

The fool believes we must simply accept what comes

He sings: He that hath and a little tiny wit;

With a heigh ho the wind and the rain;

Must make content with his fortunes fit;

For the rain it raineth every day.

But like Nabal, he is a fool.

But like Abigail we do not need to be content with the status quo and its conflicts

We can become peacemakers in a world given to conflict between extremes

Fools may in fact never be brought around to wisdom

The righteous may insist on acting like the sinners we all are

But the vocation of the peacemaker is to stand in between, witnessing to the alternative of God's way when the ways of the world so often return evil for good

In the beatitudes of Matthew 5 Jesus teaches that peacemakers make themselves a part of God's family, the children of God

In fact, all of the beatitudes suggest a way of living toward the kingdom of God that is an alternative to the normal way of the world

God stands between the folly of those who insist on living only out of their own self-centered nature and the sin of those who may act on impulse but can be called into a life more consistent with God's kingdom

Like Abigail we can become the allies of God in this work in times of challenging, even dangerous, divisions

Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God.