

“If At First You Don’t Succeed”
Judges 16:23-30/Galatians 4:1-7

As far as I know, it’s the only time someone called me a heretic.

That term describes a believer who espouses convictions contrary to official teachings of the faith and long ago, a Christian convicted of heresy would be excommunicated from the church or even put to death. In the moment someone used that term with me, I wasn’t worried about my life or continued association with the PCUSA, but it did come on a day a decision was being made as to whether or not I would be approved to become the next pastor of this church.

In the Presbyterian search process, the final step before a congregation extends a call comes when their candidate meets with a Committee on Ministry. Among other responsibilities, that group is charged with receiving new minister members. It is not unheard for approval to be denied and prior to meeting, a candidate submits a statement of faith. My conversation happened at the Church on the Mall at Plymouth Meeting. I was accompanied that day by Lou White.

Even though the committee had received my paperwork ahead of time, after a brief introduction, I read aloud my statement of faith to the group and then awaited their questions. I’m sure others around the table had points they wanted me to clarify or expound upon, but the only one I recall was a retired professor of a nearby college or seminary. He is the one who spoke of heresy so let me share the part of my statement which evoked that comment.

“I believe God created humankind to be in relationship with God,” I began. “From the beginning, the divine intention was for an ongoing bond with humanity, but freedom to choose other than God led to unfaithful acts from the first human beings.” I went on to talk about the Garden of Eden and great flood before continuing. “God attempted other means for remaining in relationship: a covenant through Abraham, a dramatic release from slavery in Egypt, a law given to Moses, the gift of a land to call their own, leadership of judges, kings, and prophets, sending the people into exile and bring them home. In each instance, God’s gracious persistence sought only human faithfulness in response, yet humankind fell short. I believe God then initiated a new covenant through Jesus of Nazareth, one who was both fully human and fully divine.”

In my examination, that professor asked, “Are you suggesting that God chose to send Jesus only because all of the other steps with human beings had fallen short?” Having learned in other such occasions that the less said the better, I replied “Yes.” “Well,” he replied, “you know that’s heretical don’t you?” “That’s not the way I view it,” I said, adding something about how it reflects the Biblical narrative. He then smiled and concluded, “Well, it’s heretical, but I like it!” With that, the exam came ended. My presence with you takes away any suspense as to the vote!

I will come back to what I believe that professor meant, but want to turn first to the final glimpse of Samson we read moments ago as it offers a relevant insight.

Over the course of this summer, we have been focusing on the book of Judges. As we saw, the reason God established the role of judges was to keep the people of Israel faithful after the death of Joshua. As we have also seen, those leaders proved to be a mix bagged in terms of being a role mode; none more imperfect than Samson. In our weeks of looking at his story, we have discovered one whose shortcomings included being selfish, vindictive, and mean; a quick temper and sore loser who was also slow in detecting danger. If all that wasn’t enough to make him a questionable choice for the leader of the Israelites, in the twenty years he served there were only two times in the Biblical narrative when he called on God. The first was after he achieved a great victory over the Philistines. The second comes in the passage before us today.

As we recalled last week, Samson's love interest—Delilah—conspired with the lords of the Philistines to capture the judge and when her efforts finally succeeded, his head had been shaved, his eyes gouged out and his hands put in chains. In today's reading, the Philistines throw a party to celebrate his capture. They have Samson brought out to entertain them, but since he cannot see, the prisoner must be led by the hand. Samson asks the attendant to position him between the two pillars in the center of the room. The building is full of partyers and the narrator adds that 3000 people were on the roof. All of them look on with derision as Samson performs.

It is then that the judge calls on his Maker. "Lord, God, remember me and strengthen only this once, O God, so that with this one act of revenge I may pay back the Philistines for my two eyes." He places his hands on the two pillars and makes one last request of God: "Let me die with the Philistines." With enough of his legendary strength back he pushes the pillars down and the roof collapses killing everyone present including Samson. "So those he killed at his death were more than those had killed during his life" is how the narrator puts it.

It's a gruesome conclusion to an unsettling tenure as judge and you probably noticed that even with his final act, Samson doesn't call for God's help so that the Philistines will know that there is one true god. He isn't wanting to protect the Israelites one last time as their spiritual, judicial, and military leader either. No, he simply wants revenge for having been blinded which suggests that he never really rose to the level of what a judge was supposed to be. One member of the Session asked me last Sunday if there was anything redemptive in the life of Samson. Her question likely echoes the feeling of a few others of you as well.

Thus, it should come as no surprise to hear that after the experience of Samson and his predecessors, that the divine experiment of bringing the people to faithfulness through judges came to an end. Samson is the last one and the next effort by God is to reluctantly agree that Israel can have its own king. When that effort fails to create the desired outcome, God sends prophets and when that doesn't accomplish the goal, allows the people to be taken into exile and a generation later brought back. Yet none of those steps proved successful in creating the lasting relationship God wanted. Thus, God took the extraordinary and enduring step of sending Jesus.

The Apostle Paul spoke of that gift in his letter to the Galatians when he said "when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law." In other words, that after all of the other ways of trying to stay in relationship with humans proved unsustainable God sent Jesus.

Many scholars have noted parallels between the life of Jesus and Samson. In both cases, prior to birth there was an angelic visit. That Old Testament judge was a Nazarite and Jesus, the one who will judge at the end of time, was a Nazarean. Both lives are described as having multiple occasions when the Spirit of God was at work and both suffered a painful death, having been betrayed by their own people. Even the image of both men at their last breath is similar with both arms outstretched—Jesus on a cross and Samson pushing apart those pillars.

Yet the most significant point of connection in my view comes from Dennis Olson, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, as he reflected on that last judge. "Perhaps at a deeper level, the Samson story affirms God's willingness to enter into the full sinfulness and rebellion of humankind in order to accomplish the purposes of God in the world. At some level, the figure of Samson embodies not only the institution of judgeship or the nation of Israel, but also God's amazing and relentless love. God keeps coming back to God's sinful people, responding to their cries of distress and promises to stay with them in and through their failures, their captivities, their exiles, and even their deaths. Whether it is the human nation of Israel or the individual person of Jesus, God is present and at work in an incarnational way in the blood

and mess and chaos of human life.” (Olson, Dennis T. *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Volume II*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998, p. 862)

That’s what I was trying to convey to a Committee on Ministry questioner twenty years ago and while it still doesn’t sound heretical to me, I think I know what troubled that professor.

As one of the central affirmations of our faith about God is that our Creator is all-knowing; that God knows how events will unfold long before they occur. Such knowledge is a source of comfort and it is a conviction about God that I hold as well. Yet what I suspect that professor heard as heretical was the implication that God didn’t know from the beginning that Jesus would need to be sent; that somehow God only figured that out as the centuries unfolded. I trust God had that kind of knowledge all along, yet the Old Testament narrative, including the troubling glimpses we have seen in Judges raise the natural question of why God took all of those steps if God knew they would not ultimately achieve the goal of a lasting relationship? Why did God try thing after another before sending his son?

I certainly don’t know, but wonder if God hoped humans would respond without needing to take that step. Perhaps God hoped that humankind would finally get it right without needing to take on flesh himself and allowing his only son to die. I don’t know. Yet what seems clear to me is the way that Scripture consistently shows the persistent and relentless love of God.

As the good news is that the entire unsettling account of those judges long ago is only another in a series of Biblical reminders that God never gives up on human beings, including us. An affirmation to my way of thinking that is not heretical in the least, but hopeful to the last.