

“Who Do You Think You Are?”

Judges 4:1-10, 13-15, 17-20 [long story short, she slew him in his sleep], 22a

Luke 14:7-14

Philemon

Our story in Judges takes place in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century BC – more than 3,000 years ago. This is after Abraham, after Moses, after Joshua led the conquest of the land of Canaan. This is after Moses and Joshua died, but before Saul became king. The Hebrew people were starting to inhabit the land. Some tribes, like Judah, Ephraim, and Manasseh, were very successful in staking their claims; other tribes, like Asher and Dan had ongoing battles. There were Philistines to the west, Ammonites to the east, Moabites and Edomites to the south, and Canaanites throughout the land. This is the last major battle in the conquest.

At this time, the people of Israel lived in territory based on what tribe they were a member of, but shared common places of worship together. They didn't have a ruler per se. G-d raised up judges to be agents of deliverance. Judges of the day went beyond what we think of when we hear the word “judge”: they tried cases and heard disputes, but they were also religious leaders. They worked to keep the people from idolatry, they preached words of G-d, and they often led the nation into battle. They were sort of judge/pastor/prophet/warriors, sent by G-d to keep the Hebrew people in the way of righteousness. Here, Deborah is the judge – a prophetess who kept counsel under a palm tree in a specific place – her very own oasis of wisdom, strength, and faith.

She was a judge in the North of Israel, in the hillside of Ephraim. She knew that the Canaanite general Sisera had gathered his forces at Mt. Carmel in the west and was preparing to attack the Hebrew people in the land. Though they had fought many battles, the Hebrew people

settled the land from South to North. When some tribe's home to be was secured, they tended to stay there and put down roots rather than continue on in the fight. So, not only are the defense forces somewhat depleted by this point, but the army under Sisera's command has 900 chariots of iron. 900! For those of you keeping score at home, that is a lot of chariots. You may be wondering: well, how many chariots did the Hebrew people have. Not a one. They didn't have horses; they didn't have smiths to forge the chariots. They were just them, going into battle with faith in G-d.

Deborah sends for Barak, the great military strategist, to charge him to lead the people of G-d to victory. The Canaanites oppressed the Israelites cruelly for twenty years and Deborah hears from G-d that the time has come to fight back. She tells him to assemble the troops at Mt. Tabor in the east (some 37 miles away from Mt. Carmel). Deborah herself pledges to draw Sisera's troops toward Mt. Tabor so that Barak might lead them to victory. But this man, this well-respected commander tells Deborah, "If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not go with me, I will not go." Was this a lack of self-confidence in himself as a leader? A lack of faith in G-d? A political strategy to show others that his actions were blessed? We'll never know. Deborah agrees to go with him, but tells Barak that he will not have the glory of capturing Sisera himself – instead, he would fall to a woman.

As the battle begins, Sisera marches his troops across the valley of Jezreel and begins his attack of the Hebrew people atop Mt. Tabor. But they have the height advantage (and chariots rather don't like going up steep slopes) so the Hebrew people pushed the troops downward into the plain of Jezreel. Little did they realize, G-d had brought torrential rains the previous night and the sometimes dry river of Kishon burst its banks with torrents of water. As the Hebrew people pushed the Canaanites into the plain, their chariot wheels were caught up in the mud and

the flooding. Coming down from their chariots, they were defeated as they fled westward. Only Sisera escaped the battle.

He takes refuge in the tent of Heber and Jael. Now, given how this story ends up, you may think he was crazy to trust this particular couple with his life. But it seems that Heber, a member of the Kenite tribe, was a smith. Who has need of smithing work? Sisera and his troops. Who can pay him lots of money? Definitely Sisera. So, despite being a Kenite, who were a people historically pretty friendly to the Hebrew people, Heber looks to his wallet in making alliances. Jael, though, does not seem to share her husband's flexible loyalties. Whether from personal loyalty to the Hebrew people or personal faith in G-d, we don't really know why she did what she did. But she lured him in – a man who has just battled for his life, a man who has just run miles from an army that wants his head. He must have been exhausted, starving, dehydrated. He wanted water and Jael gave him warm milk (which certainly had the same, magical, sleep-inducing qualities then that it does now). She covered him with a rug or a blanket and when he was fast asleep she...well if you want to read the gory details, feel free to do so. Needless to say, he met his maker that night. Barak showed up the next day to find Sisera dead and the people were free from oppression once more.

And now, on to Philemon! The reading this morning was the entire book of Philemon. It may have seemed like a lot (especially together with the Judges passage), but, man, how often do we get to hear or think about a book of scripture – in its entirety – in one worship service! But I digress...Philemon is the shortest of Paul's letters. It was written either around the year 55 (if he was in prison in Ephesus when he wrote it) or somewhere between 61 and 63 (if he wrote it from prison in Rome). In any case, Paul is an old man by this point. He's dedicated his life to spreading the Gospel and now he's in jail for it. Paul is not messing around. Earlier in his career,

when Paul was preaching and evangelizing in Ephesus, a man heard and was converted. That man likely started the first church in Colossae. So, Paul knew some members of the church, but he had probably never been there when he wrote Colossians and it's possible that he hadn't been there yet when he wrote Philemon. He might not have known Philemon personally, but, for Paul, the Body of Christ was a family – all were children of G-d. Put another way, Paul felt called to tell anybody something they could do for love of Christ in their life.

The situation here seems to be that Philemon was a wealthy guy who had a church that met in his house. He owned a slave, Onesimus, who had run away and found Paul (whether in Ephesus or Rome). Paul got to know Onesimus, he preached to him, he prayed with him, and Onesimus' heart turned. He became a Christian. But...in running away, Onesimus had committed a crime – a crime that could be punishable by death if his “owner” so chose.

So what does Paul do? He appeals to Philemon as a Christian, but very sneakily. He praises Philemon's faith; he prays that Philemon might see, “the good that we may [yet] do for Christ.” He says that Onesimus has lived up to his name (which means “useful” or “profitable”) and has become so useful to Paul that Onesimus is like his own child. He says, “I am sending him, that is my own heart, back to you.” Then, none too subtly, Paul talks about how much good Christian service that Onesimus has offered – how he has spread the gospel and served Christ faithfully. Paul says that he could command Philemon to do his duty (not even spelling out what it is), but that love is the better ground for good works. Real love in Christ is expressed by voluntary action – not compulsion.

Paul works his letter to a crescendo when he says that Onesimus was separated from his owner so that Philemon could, “have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother – especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in

the Lord.” I’m sure by now your heads are ringing with Galatians 3:28, right?, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Paul confronts the injustice of slavery, not through high rhetoric on the institution or society as a whole – Paul speaks to this one man. What does your faith in Christ mean to you? Who do you think you are? If you were created, loved, and covered by the grace of G-d through Jesus Christ, how can you not see Onesimus as a child of G-d: knit together by G-d, one who bears the image of G-d? If there is neither slave or free, male or female, then what do you really see when you look on this man who you think that you own?

Paul urges his influence and stature as evangelist and apostle. He stands by Onesimus, but he doesn’t plead for his life. He simply states that Philemon surely knows what is right, what is just. Paul says, “if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.” I don’t know if you caught this from the beginning, but Paul doesn’t just write this letter to Philemon. No, sir, he writes it to Philemon, his wife, and the entire church that meets in his house. This letter, with its subtle charge for the wealthy man to do the right thing, is for public circulation! Not only that, but at the end of the letter, Paul says they should prepare a room because he wants to come for a visit. Paul is gonna check up on how this all works out.

When we look back over the lesson from Judges and the lesson from Philemon, we see a lot of people who, well, aren’t exactly who we’d expect. Deborah is a judge – the only female judge mentioned in the Bible. There’s no commentary explaining it and there’s no sense that she’s any less awesome because she’s a woman. Barak is an accomplished military commander, but he won’t go into battle without the presence of the prophetess. Jael turns out to be a super sneaky assassin. Then in Philemon, you have a good man – maybe even the head of the church in his house – not seeing the change that comes in Christ and Paul noodging him like a Jewish

mother. But my favorite is Onesimus... This was a man who even Paul acknowledged as having been a bit useless; a man who had no status or standing in society, no real direction or purpose in life. But did you know that after Saint Timothy stepped down as bishop of Ephesus, a man named Onesimus became the bishop? Was it the same man? Had Paul met him in just the right moment; touched his life in just such a way that he heeded G-d's calling to be a pillar in the still young church? I'd like to think that it was the same man. Otherwise, why would the early church have kept the letter to Philemon around?

In the Gospel text, Jesus watches with some interest as people vie for the place of honor at a dinner. In this simple, normal, socially approved contest, Jesus sees where their focus is and where their hearts are. They want to be among the best of the best people. Or, rather, they want to be seen as the best by the best people. To Jesus, this is folly! Who do these people think that they are? The worth that they see in themselves and from others comes from something as functionally meaningless as their chair's position at a table. Jesus has come to show them that these rankings, these structures, these moments of humiliating others – those are not of G-d. Didn't G-d form all of us – uniquely displaying G-d's image? Doesn't G-d love us and care for us beyond the level of love that the world could ever give? Why are we fooling with chairs and status when we could see each other through the eyes of faith?

Through the eyes of faith, these boundaries and shamings make zero sense. To paraphrase Dietrich Bonhoeffer, at the foot of the cross, we all look the same. What separates me or you from anyone else – anyone on this planet – is nothing, nothing compared to the distance that could exist between us and G-d. But G-d seeks us out, G-d forgives us, G-d upholds a relationship of love with us so that we might be free. And if G-d sustains this love with each one on this green earth, who are we to withhold it?

Just like the cartoon, up there, Jesus is busy erasing all the lines that we draw – the lines that we draw to keep people out and the lines we draw to keep people in. In each of these stories that we've studied this morning, people couldn't see others because they had made up their minds about who they were and what they were capable of. Sisera assumed that Jael was harmless because she was a woman; Philemon assumed that Onesimus was a useless slave; the Pharisees with Jesus that day thought that their importance needed to be proved. But all of these people turn out to be different, more, more beautiful and complex, more capable and remarkable than society's assumptions suggest that they should be.

So, my challenge to you this morning is this: ask yourself, "who do you think you are?" First ask yourself and then ask yourself the same question about each one you meet. If you think we are all children of G-d, pay attention to the impulse judgments that your brain dishes out. Look at what we have learned about certain types of people: young or old, male or female, different races, different abilities or debilities, or just the different. And then look for what G-d sees. Look for what G-d loves in that person; for why G-d created them and walks with them. Look for them to be who they are and believe in the person that any of us might yet be because nothing is impossible with G-d. Our Gospel lesson tells us that the best banquet, the true feast of G-d, includes "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind." Invite those who can't repay you – see beyond the lines and the boxes to the luminous soul beneath the surface – and all of our lives will be richer for it. Amen?