

Saul

Sermon
Rev. Rebecca Clancy
I Samuel 31:1-7

King Saul was a tragic figure. This is a statement about which there is no room for argument. The facts speak for themselves.

Saul descended into madness and led the army of Israel to the brink of destruction at the hands of the Philistines, destruction halted, ironically, only by his suicide in battle, and this only after he had witnessed the slaughter of his three sons. And that wasn't even an end of it. The Philistines found his remains and desecrated them. They hung his armor in their temple, and they hung his body, after they had decapitated it, on the wall of their fortress. On the basis of these facts one could hardly argue that Saul was a *heroic* figure.

Where there *is* room for argument, however, is as to the question *why* Saul was a tragic figure. What was the flaw within him, as tragedy presupposes, that led to his demise? Various theories have been advanced, and though the various theories stand, they all seem, to me at least, to be facile and inadequate.

There is the theory that the flaw within Saul was jealousy, jealousy of David to be precise. And in truth Saul *was* jealous of David. David, after all, was one of the greatest men in human history. I personally wouldn't want him to happen into *my* court were I king.

No sooner did David arrive at Saul's court than he slew Goliath, who had paralyzed the army of Israel with terror. Then Saul's son Jonathon transferred his loyalty to him. Then Saul's daughters Merab and Michel fell in love with him. Then he outdid Saul on the field of battle. Then he won the hearts of the people of Israel. Yes, Saul *was* jealous of David, but David came to his court in the first place to play for him on his lyre because Saul had become tormented. No, Saul's jealousy of David *exacerbated* the flaw within him, but the flaw within him preceded his jealousy of David.

There is too the theory that the flaw within him was mental illness, and in truth Saul *became* mentally ill. I am convinced that he became what we would call today a schizophrenic. His jealousy deteriorated into paranoia, which in turn deteriorated into delusions, which in turn deteriorated into mania. He grew obsessed that David was out to get him, so he attempted by a careless toss of his spear to kill him and make it look like an accident. When that failed, he sent David on suicide missions against the Philistines. When David proved seemingly indestructible he grew more blatant in his attempts on his life until David was forced to flee his court. But David's departure was not enough for Saul. His country at war, he set off in reckless pursuit of him, slaughtering *en route* anyone he believed had abetted him. And when finally, through dereliction of duty, the Philistines began to close in on him, he groveled and sniveled at the feet of a medium begging her to tell him what to do. Yes, Saul became mentally ill, but his mental illness came even later than his jealousy, and both were preceded by his torment. So why did Saul become tormented in the first place? Surely that is the key to uncovering the flaw within him that made him a tragic figure.

The answer, I think, is a subtle one, which is why the theories have tended to overlook it. Saul was anointed king on the strength of his youthful promise, and he had plenty of it, as so many do. But when the blush of youth passed and the long years of maturity ensued; when he found himself a person like the rest of us -- a person with a given personality, a given set of traits, a given set of strengths and weaknesses, he thoughtlessly presumed that the *prestige of his office* was all that he needed to rule. And when he was confronted by the strenuous challenges of that office and did not rightly meet them, he began to incite the notice of those around him. He began to sense their growing disrespect. He sensed that they were turning on him, that he was losing his grip, but he couldn't discern why. This is why he became tormented. *The flaw within him that made him a tragic figure then was that by some blindness or dullness he failed to realize that he was responsible to become and remain the stuff of his office; he was responsible to become and remain the stuff of his office.* But he failed at that responsibility, and he lived, and died, to count the cost.

King Saul. A tragic figure. Not exactly a *positive* role model, but if you think about it the Bible offers us as many negative role models as positive ones. There is Abraham, but there too is Lot. There is Moses, but there too is Aaron. There are the prophets, but there is too the entire people of Israel....This is because we can learn as much from negative role models as from positive ones. And indeed we have much to learn from Saul. Of

course, the stakes, mercifully, are lower. We are not kings, and the Philistines are not at the gates. But the rules of life that applied to Saul apply to us as well.

For many of us our youthful years were, as were Saul's, years of promise -- everything came easily. The world, as Matthew Arnold put it, "lay before us like a land of dreams." But whether our youthful years were years of promise or not, the years of maturity now ensue, and we find ourselves people like everyone else, each with our own set of givens. Yet at the same time, we all occupy offices that are very prestigious, to my mind, just as prestigious as the office of king. I refer to the office of mother, of father, of grandparent, of wife, of husband, of son, and of daughter; to the office of friend and colleague, to the office of vocation and avocation. But, again, as with Saul, the prestige of our offices are not sufficient. We are responsible to become and remain the stuff of those offices. And if we grow dull or blind to this responsibility, then we will become problems for those around us. No, we won't be driven to fall on our swords, but we will become problems for those around us nonetheless. We will cause relationships to become skewed or even inverted. The boss will become divested of any genuine authority. The child will become the true parent. Those around us may avoid or reject us, or they may tolerate or accommodate or enable us out of pity or duty. But failing in our responsibility to become and maintain the stuff of our offices, we will become their responsibility.

Surely Jesus had something like this in mind when he told the parable of the talents. The third servant was endowed with a measure of talent, not as much as the others, not a kingly amount, but he was nonetheless responsible for it. And what did he do with it? He

buried it. What's buried tends to rot. When we bury whatever measure of talent we are endowed with, rather than take responsibility for it, it too will rot, and we will find ourselves in the outer darkness. But Jesus doesn't want us in the outer darkness. This is why he told the parable. He wants us *all* to be good and faithful servants, and this means taking responsibility for our lives. Amen.