

“Saved From Ourselves”
1 Samuel 2:11-17, 22-26
Romans 8:31-39

The story is told of two brothers who terrorized a small town for decades. They were unfaithful to their wives, abusive to their children and dishonest in business. The younger brother died unexpectedly. The surviving sibling went to the pastor of a local church with a request. “I’d like for you to conduct my brother’s funeral,” he said, “but it’s important to me that during the service, you tell everyone my brother was a saint.” “But he was far from that,” the minister protested. The man pulled out his checkbook. “Reverend,” he said “I’m prepared to give \$100,000 to your church. All I’m asking is that you publicly state my brother was a saint.”

On the day of the funeral, the pastor began his comments in this way: “Everyone here knows that the deceased was a wicked man, a womanizer, and just plain mean. He terrorized his employees and cheated on his taxes.” He then paused before continuing, “But as evil and sinful as this man was, compared to his older brother, he was a saint!” (*Leadership*, Fall 1995, p. 47)

Our Old Testament reading tells of two real brothers who were far from saints, too. In their case, however, once they were gone, there were no attempts to cover-up or soften the account of their true nature. Instead, the narrative we heard offered an unblinking look at what they had done and how their father tried to turn them around. He wasn’t successful, but his efforts even so point toward the one who intercedes still and in a far more complete way.

Those verses offer a continuation of our summer-long look at the life of Samuel, the last of Israel’s judges and the one who will transition the nation into its era of having kings. To this point, all of our readings have told of what preceded the start of Samuel’s work, telling of his mother’s inability to bear children and how God granted Hannah’s prayer that she give birth to a son. After that hope was realized, she fulfilled a promise by placing Samuel as a young boy in service to God, under the tutelage of a priest named Eli. To this point, we have heard no words from Samuel and that continues today as he appears in our text only as a contrast to Eli’s sons.

Those young men—Hophni and Phinehas--are introduced in this way: “Now the sons of Eli were scoundrels; they had no regard for the LORD or for the duties of the priests to the people.” The narrator explained how when faithful Jews would come to sacrifice meat to God that it would be placed in a pot or caldron of boiling water. It was accepted practice in that era for priests to stick a fork into the water and be permitted to eat whatever they pulled out; it was part of their livelihood and compensation. Meat with fat on it, however, was designated as being for God alone, but Eli’s sons demanded those choice pieces for themselves, threatening anyone who tried to stop them. In addition, we are told those two priests had affairs with women who served at the temple entrance. Thus, they were more than scoundrels as they brought dishonor on their profession and violated the trust given to them as spiritual leaders in the community.

In our passage, their father confronts his sons with their greed, extortion and immorality. “Why do you do such things? It is not a good report that I hear the people of the LORD spreading abroad.” Eli is troubled by what they are doing and the poor light their actions bring upon the nation. He tells them that in sinning against God they risk their own lives. “If one person sins against another, someone can intercede for the sinner with the LORD, but if someone sins against the LORD, who can make intercession?” Eli is lifting up the key role priests played then of bridging the gulf between the sinner and God, lamenting that when his sons in their priestly role sin against God, they seal their own fate. The words have no effect. “They would

not listen to the voice of their father," we read. In contrast, our text concludes: "Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and with the people."

Certainly a major intention of that scene is to set the stage for how Samuel will become Eli's successor, serving as the moral leader of the people. Yet I was more struck by the attempt of that elderly priest to set his sons on the right path when he asked, "if someone sins against the LORD, who can make intercession?" He was trying to make things right yet those young men were uninterested in anything he had to say. It is a reaction many of us have seen, too.

As there are times as a friend or parent, teacher or co-worker when we try to help someone who is heading down a troubling path, too. Perhaps they are constantly putting down anyone who disagrees with them. Maybe the issue is alcohol or food that they are relying upon in unhealthy ways. Perhaps it comes when the other is cutting corners on schoolwork or paperwork in ways that we fear will catch up with them. Like Eli, in such times, we strive to help others recognize where their actions are leading; of how they, too, are acting as their own worst enemy. Sometimes, our efforts pay off, yet there are times when persons just don't see it.

I once heard of a prosperous, young Wall Street broker who met and fell in love with a rising young actress. He frequently would escort her around town and soon decided that he wanted to marry her. Being a careful man, though, he decided that before proposing marriage he should have a private investigating agency check her background and present activities. After all, he reminded himself, he had both a growing fortune and reputation to protect.

The man requested that the agency not reveal his identity to the investigator who would be making the report and in time, the findings came back. It said the actress had an unblemished past, a spotless reputation, and that her friends and associates were of the best repute. There was a problem, though, as the investigator said, "The only shadow is that she is often seen around town in the company of a young broker of dubious practices and principles." (*Bits 'n Pieces*, May 21, 1998, pp. 15-16) Sometimes, we can be surprised as to who is saving whom, a point that emerges from our New Testament reading, too.

Those words from Paul are among my favorite in all of Scripture. They come as part of a letter to the Christians in Rome and in this chapter he has been talking about how we are all children of God, but that such a tie does not exempt us from hard times. He then asks "What then are we to say about these things?" and proceeds to offer a series of questions and answers.

"If God is for us," he writes, "who is against us?" He answers "He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?" Paul continues. "Who will bring a charge against us?" and "Who is to condemn?" Again the answer is "no one." "It is Christ Jesus, who died," he goes on, "yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us." Paul is answering the question Eli posed centuries before when that distressed father asked, "If someone sins against the LORD, who can make intercession?" There was no answer then, yet since the time of Christ, Paul affirms that Jesus alone offers us that enduring gift of interceding on our behalf.

The Apostle then asks a series of questions about who or what can separate us from the love of God raising all kinds of possibilities—hardship and distress, persecution and the sword—before answering with a powerful conclusion: "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

He is affirming that nothing can break the bond of God's love and it was another Paul, a

Presbyterian seminary professor from the last century named Paul Achtemeier who summed up that good news in this way: “If no creature can separate us from God’s love, then in the end even our almost limitless ability to rebel against God is overcome; and we are saved from our last and greatest enemy, ourselves.” (Achtemeier, Paul, *Romans*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985, p. 150)

Such words reveal that while the primary and most eternal nature of Jesus’ gift to humankind is that of interceding on our behalf with God and save us for eternity, that his life and teaching, his ministry and his example are also intended to save us from all kinds of other struggles of our own making right now.

As Christ wants to save us from the idea that our parent's love is dependent upon our latest grade or that the most important thing in life is to be popular. He wants to save us from thinking that how we treat others doesn’t matter or that no one really expects us to keep our word. He wants to save us from the misperception that our work is more important than our relationships or that our true worth is a financial calculation. He wants to save us thinking that one more technological toy will give our children what they need or that we can be freed from addictions on our own or from believing that our task on earth is to convince others we are right.

All of those intended corrections and more come to us in the life and death of Christ and it is that intercessory gift which enables us to answer with confidence the question posed by a priest long ago, too. “If someone sins against the Lord,” he asked, “who can make intercession?” As we trust that ultimately it is Christ alone who does that and for such a gift we give thanks this day, knowing that we can be saved from all things, even when necessary, from ourselves.