

“Five Smooth Stones”

Readings

I Samuel 17:38 –40

Saul clothed David with his armor; he put a bronze helmet on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail. David strapped Saul’s sword over the armor, and he tried to walk, for he was not used to them. The David said to Saul, “I cannot walk with these; for I am not used to them.” So David removed them. Then he took his staff in his hand, and chose five smooth stones from the wadi, and put them in his shepherd’s bag, in the pouch; his sling was in his hand, and he drew near to the Philistine.

Faith is by no means dead in the world. A devil’s plenty of it is loose on the planet. Right or wrong, our faith must needs express itself and have its consequences for woe or weal. ... The question concerning faith is not, Shall I be a person of faith? The proper question is, rather, Which faith is mine? Or, better, Which faith should be mine? for, whether a person craves prestige, wealth, security, or amusement, whether a person lives for country, for science, for God, or for plunder, that person is demonstrating a faith, is showing that she or he puts confidence in something. (from “A Faith for the Free” in **The Essential James Luther Adams, Selected Essays and Addresses**. Edited and introduced by George Kimmich Beach. Skinner House Books, Boston, 1998, pp. 26-27.)

Sermon

We are called, right now, to make our mark on the face of history. Many a preacher will begin their remarks with words something like: *We are living in difficult times. This is the time for us to make our difference in the world. We are called to make our mark on human life and history in accordance with our faith.*

True in almost any era. True today.

James Luther Adams says that every person has faith. Echoing Emerson’s words, “A person will worship something – have no doubt about that.” Adams says:

Right or wrong, our faith must needs express itself and have its consequences for woe or weal. There is no escape. The question

concerning faith is not, Shall I be a person of faith? The proper question is, Which faith should be mine?

The Sunday morning question for us, week after week, is: How, then, shall I live? For today, the question might be asked this way: How does my faith help me make my mark on the history?

Let me tell you my version of the story of David and Goliath and how it was that David made his mark on history.

The Philistines and the Israelites were long standing enemies. There came a time when the Philistines gathered their army on the mountain across the valley from the place where King Saul of Israel had gathered his army. One man, a giant of a man, came walking out from the ranks of the Philistine army and challenged Israel to send out their best champion that the two of them might engage in a two-man winner take all contest.

Listen to the description of the champion Goliath. He was nearly ten feet tall. His armor weighed over 100 pounds. The tip of his spear was heavier than an Olympic shot-put ball. The shaft of his spear was the size of a roof rafter. This was no ordinary soldier. And then, he issued his singular challenge. "I will fight your best soldier." The scripture says: *When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.* Well, I guess so!

Israel did not have a champion willing to face Goliath that day. Goliath repeated his challenge every day for forty days and still Israel had no champion. Then, young David was sent by his father to bring food to his three older brothers who were soldiers in Saul's army. When David arrived, he saw Goliath come forward and heard him issue his challenge. When David saw the Israelite soldiers flee from Goliath in fear, he volunteered to fight Goliath – saying that he would not be alone but would have the Lord God of Hosts on his side. It was not David's wisdom. It was not David's strength. It was not David's experience. It was David's faith that propelled him forward that day.

David was under age and under size and under experienced. Nevertheless, in the end, King Saul agreed to send David as his Champion. He offered David the use of his own fine armor and sword. But David declined, saying that he was not used to wearing armor and using a sword. He needed his familiar tools and methods. He sought to prevail over Goliath in the same way that a shepherd prevails over threats

from bears and wolves who seek to kill sheep. David walked out to meet Goliath with his shepherd's staff, his slingshot and five smooth stones he had carefully selected from the riverbed.

We can surmise the rest of the story. Goliath laughed at David and taunted him. David replied that Goliath must prevail over not only him, but also against his faith and the power of his faith. As Goliath rushed forth with a battle cry waving his sword, David let fly the first stone from his sling. His aim and his launch were sure and true. The stone hit Goliath in the center of his forehead and he fell to the ground. David then killed him and claimed victory for Israel.

I can't tell you what the specific giants are that you face in your personal lives. I can only be assured that there are, or will be, some. Each of us will face giants of varying proportions -- giants that cause fear and trembling, giants that cause anger and outrage, giants that cause pain and suffering, giants that bring despair and hopelessness, giants that require us to make very difficult choices.

As a community, the giants we face are equally formidable. We face a war that appears to have to end and has already cost billions of dollars and hundreds of thousands lives. We face an increase in the oppression of people of color, poor people and non-heterosexual people everywhere. We face the threat of terrorists of many kinds. We face the threat of a national agenda that favors the already advantaged and may strangle the lives of our children to the seventh generation and beyond. We face the threat of global environmental degradation. We face the threat of religious extremists who seek to make the rules and be the rulers. The list goes on. You can add your own giants.

Our faith cannot keep the giants away from us. Our faith is here to help us face and disarm the giants that threaten us. Faith gives us the resources and tools to meet the giants and prevail.

When faced with a giant, David chose five smooth stones and his faith in the God of Israel. Then, he went out and made his mark on the face of history.

What will we take with us into battle with the giants we face? What is in the pouch that we carry?

James Luther Adams, a Unitarian Universalist, was probably the most influential liberal theologian of the late twentieth century. He too lived in a time when his generation was called to make its mark on the face of history. He carried in his

pouch what he called the five smooth stones of liberalism, or what we might call the five smooth stones of liberal religion, our religion.

We, like David, do not wear the usual armor with us. We travel light and we know what we are comfortable carrying. Unitarian Universalists don't go out armed with heavy creeds and doctrines in confronting the giant evils of the world. Instead, we carry the five well-worn principles of progressive religion that Adams described.

Here they are.

- 1.) The conviction that revelation is continuous.
- 2.) Relationships between people should be voluntary.
- 3.) Religious liberalism affirms the moral obligation to direct one's efforts toward the establishment of a just and loving community.
- 4.) Merely thinking ourselves virtuous and well-intentioned is not sufficient.
- 5.) Finally, liberalism holds that the resources (divine and human) that are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism.

Let me try to say something about these five smooth stones of liberal religion and how they are powerful tools for us in meeting the giants that threaten us.

One. Revelation is continuous. The divine and creative spirit of our universe has not stopped interacting with creation. Human experience has not stopped providing new and better ways of living. We believe that the unfolding and discovery of truth is ongoing.

We know that truth can be found in a variety of places. We acknowledge that we do not have all the truth that can be had.

We do not spend time building walls and garrisons around our own private collection of truth, trying to keep friends safely inside and strangers out. We spend our time building bridges across the great divides of human experience. In this way, learning and discovering the ways of the divine and our own experience, we work for the community of justice and love.

This smooth stone – the stone of continuing revelation – keeps us open to new things and new people and new experiences.

Two. Relationships between people should be voluntary. They should rest on mutuality and persuasion as much as possible, not on coercion and power-over. We choose to be with each other. We choose to be here today. This is the faith community we have chosen. We are not coerced into becoming or remaining a

member of this society. We choose our associations and we choose those that affirm life and promote justice.

This stone – the stone of voluntary association – keeps us committed to our purpose and mission when the giants attempt to name us something we are not or attempt to define our agenda in ways that we reject. It keeps us committed to each other when the going gets difficult.

Three. Religious liberalism affirms the moral obligation to direct one's efforts toward the establishment of a just and loving community. James Luther Adams says that a faith that is not the sister of justice brings nothing but grief. It is this stone – the stone of the moral obligation of liberal religion to work for an increasingly just and loving community – that results in the widespread social action program of our local congregations and our association. A hallmark of religious liberals is their commitment to expanding justice, to opening the gates of equality to more and more people. We can be strong and proud to stand in the tradition of liberty for all, justice for all, and a love that includes all.

Of all the five smooth stones of our faith, this is the one that I carry most closely and hold on to most tightly, until it is time to let it fly. To sling it in the direction of the giants of prejudice, protectionism, greed and all the other "isms" that seek to harm, not help.

This stone – our moral obligation to work for a just and loving community – keeps us focused on the ultimate goal. It helps us prioritize and it provides a trajectory of justice and love that, when it hits its target, leaves a mark on the face of history.

Four. Merely thinking ourselves virtuous and well-intentioned is not sufficient. We need to actually do something. Action is required. The greatest accurate criticism of the liberal is that liberals talk strongly and act weakly. We are called not just to describe the mark we want to leave on history, but to actually do what it takes to make the mark.

In order to do that, we need to work together, with each other and with all our allies. We need to be organized and we need to embrace the power we have and use it wisely.

Adams says it this way. We must practice the organization of power and the power of organization in order to realize the social incarnation of the good we envision.

This stone – the stone of action – brings us the power of our united and focused energy and vision.

Five. Liberalism holds that the resources (divine and human) that are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism. This view does not necessarily involve immediate optimism, for we recognize the possible

or probable existence of evil and suffering at any given moment. Still there is something in the genuine liberal perspective that, while recognizing this tragic nature of the human condition, continues to live with a dynamic optimism as the only viable attitude for the long run.

Our optimism is not Pollyanna. Our optimism is based on a belief, born of both divine and human experience, that humanity is not cursed, that human history will not necessarily end in an Armageddon of suffering and despair. Our optimism is based on the belief that all people are worthy of dignity and respect. Our Optimism grows out of the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew prophets that in the life and message of Jesus and his followers. It continues with the great prophetic leaders of our own time, those who lead the way toward justice and liberty for all.

Adams describes the prophetic religion as the one that requires an ultimate optimism. He says, "The affirmative answer of prophetic religion, which may be heard in the very midst of the doom that threatens like thunder, is that history is a struggle in dead earnest between justice and injustice, looking towards the ultimate victory in the promise and fulfillment of grace. Anyone who does not enter into that struggle with the affirmation of love and beauty misses the mark and thwarts creation as well as self-creation."

The fifth smooth stone – the stone of optimism – leads us to work hard and to maintain our attitude of inclusion and love in all that we do.

Overcoming giants is not something that we seek. They come to us uninvited. Like Goliath, they are big and well armored. Like Goliath, they may look unbeatable. Like Goliath, they underestimate the power of faith, they underestimate the power of our defenses, they underestimate the effectiveness of a slingshot and five smooth stones of faith.

I have suggested that the Five Smooth Stones of Liberal Religion are good and necessary items to have in our pouch as we try to live the best lives we can. We are indeed about the work of building a just and loving community – whether that community is our home and family or whether that community extends to the ends of the earth. We need to have the strength and courage to face the giants who confront us.

Every generation has a time when they are called. This is our time. This is our time to be called to leave our mark on the face of history.

How then shall I live?

These five smooth stones -- Revelation continues; Association is voluntary; We are morally obligated to work for justice and love; We need the organization of power and the power of organization; and We maintain an attitude of ultimate optimism -- can help.

It is sometimes difficult to be a proud and practicing religious liberal in these challenging times. But, this liberalism is our strength and our promise. The giants will confront us. We will meet the challenge. We will make our mark on the face of history.

We can do it. We must do it. We will do it.

In the words of James Luther Adams: "Thus, with all the realism and tough-mindedness that can be mustered, the genuine liberal can finally hear the Hallelujah Chorus – intellectual integrity, social relevance, amplitude of perspective, and the spirit of true liberation offer no less."

Go now, and hear the Hallelujah Chorus.

Blessed Be. I Love You. Amen.