



## **Old Testament Parables – The Trees**

### **Judges 9:7-15**

This sermon will be the third and final in a series on Old Testament Parables. You may remember that three weeks ago we read the parable cautioning us against misplaced pride. It was the Parable of the Cedar and the Thistle. Two weeks ago we read the parable the prophet Nathan told King David about the ewe lamb, and hopefully we understand the necessity of compassion in the life of a disciple.

Today's text is a parable that is shouted from a mountaintop by one of Gideon's sons. It is a parable that should make us sensitive to the force or forces we allow to rule or influence our lives.

This may be the most important question to ask ourselves: What is it that influences our lives or what or who rules over us? Last week we saw the horrors of extreme racism in Charlottesville. We saw on the television and read in the paper about the hatred, anger and violence. There were rocks, bottles and fists thrown, followed by an irate white supremacist driver plowing his car into a crowd of people. The car was driven by a man who idolizes Adolf Hitler.

What is the world coming to? Today's sermon asks the question, who or what rules over you – your passions, your desires, the drive for wealth, your understanding of morality? Or is it Jesus Christ – now that is an attitude worthy of being king, to make the love of Jesus Christ known even in the face of such extreme hate, even if it means that I must suffer.

I appreciate one of our members who pointed out to me the sad irony that the white supremacist demonstration was scheduled at the University of Virginia, founded by Thomas Jefferson, who penned the words, "We hold these truths to be

self-evident that all men are created equal.” And of course if he lived today he would have written “all people.”

The Parable of the Trees asks us to examine who will be our king. And from the get go, this parable is foreign to us independent and free Americans, for though we have heard of royalty, we do not experience or understand it like our English brothers and sisters do. And I give thanks that our nation’s founders wrote about the equality of all people. No one in this nation is considered royalty. No one should be given rank or power based upon their status at birth. And disciples of Jesus Christ understand that every person we will see today is in reality a child of God, and thus we have all been given a royal birth. We are all princes and princesses in the Kingdom of God.

With that said, we all have a king and the question is, “Will our king be one who makes us better people, one who loves people, and one who cares for the contentment of our soul, or will our ruler be one we fear, one who debases us, and one who will use us?”

I personally, like many true blue Americans, have a bad opinion of queens and kings. I recall rulers like Friedrich Wilhelm, King of Prussia in the early eighteenth century.

Friedrich was known to be a short-tempered man. He detested ceremony. He had a habit of walking the streets of Berlin unaccompanied, and if anyone happened to displease him, he would not hesitate to use his walking stick on the unfortunate offender. Not surprisingly, when people saw him at a distance, they would quietly leave the vicinity.

Once, Friedrich came pounding down a street when a Berliner caught sight of him—but too late. His attempt to withdraw into a doorway was foiled. “You there!” said Friedrich, “Where are you going?”

The man began to shake, “Into this house, Your Majesty.”

“Is it your house?”

“No, Your Majesty.”

“A friend’s house?”

“No, Your Majesty.”

“Then why are you entering it?”

The man then began to fear that he might be taken for a burglar, so he blurted out the truth: “To avoid Your Majesty!”

“Why would you wish to avoid me?”

“Because I am afraid of Your Majesty.”

At this, Friedrich Wilhelm became livid with rage, and seizing the man by the shoulders, he shook him violently, crying, “How dare you fear me! I am your ruler! You’re supposed to love me. Love me, you wretch! Love me!”

A statement of my faith, one with which you may or may not agree but I hope you will at least consider, is that even Presbyterians will choose a king. We will choose the one we will serve. Hopefully, we have the wisdom and inspiration to choose Jesus Christ. But our choice will make all the difference, for a bad king will slay you, maybe not literally, but he will, and like Friedrich, demand your love while ripping you apart, but a good king will give you life.

Today’s parable finds its context in the Book of Judges. Remember we are told in the Book of Judges that the cruel Midianites had overrun Israel. In their conquest they ravaged the land. They are described as locusts as they stripped the land bare; causing mass starvation. In their oppression God’s people cried out for help. They repented of their idolatry. God heard their cry, and sent an angel to confront Gideon under the oak of Ophrah.

There under the mighty oak, Gideon was thrashing out wheat in a wine press in order to hide from the Midianites. As he worked an angel appeared to him saying, “Mighty Hero,” and told Gideon that God would use him to deliver the people from the hand of their oppressors.

Gideon had his doubts, so he asked for a sign. He placed a fleece of wool in the wine press and asked that the next morning the dew would make the fleece wet, yet the rest of the ground was to be dry. This would be a sign for Gideon that what the angel said was from God. And the next morning the fleece was wet and the ground was dry.

Gideon not easily convinced, so begging patience from the angel, asked that the next morning the fleece be dry and that the ground be wet. And, of course, that is what happened.

So Gideon raised an army of 32,000 men. It's hard to believe there were that many fighting men in Israel, so you have to hand it to Gideon for his recruiting skills. However, the Lord God said, "Gideon, that is too many."

"What do you mean, that is too many?"

"Gideon, you have too many men."

"But Lord, the Midianites have more, you can't expect me to fight with any less."

"Gideon, I am the Lord, and it's too many. Go to your men and tell anyone who is a little nervous about going into battle that they can leave with no questions asked."

So 22,000 men went home, but there were still 10,000 left to fight the Midianites. The Lord God said, "Gideon, that is too many."

"What do you mean, that is too many?"

"Gideon, you have too many men."

"But Lord, how can we fight with any fewer?"

"Gideon, I am the Lord, and it's too many. So go to the river and watch your men drink. If anyone drinks directly from the river send them home, but keep those who dip their hand in to the water then drink from their hand."

Well the first thousand men went to drink and to Gideon's dismay only 30 drank from their hand. Of the ten thousand who wanted to fight only 300 were selected. "You see, Gideon, if you fight with 32,000 and win, everyone will think you are a great general. If you fight with 10,000, people may think it was just luck. But if you fight with 300, everyone will know that I the Lord won the battle."

And you know the story. Gideon and his men waited until evening and they surrounded the enemy camp and made a lot of noise and built a bunch of fires and the enemy was thrown into confusion and began to fight among themselves, and God won the battle.

Shortly after the battle, the people asked Gideon to be their king. It is amazing that such a miracle could take place, and the people still believed that Gideon defeated the Midianites. How blind can we be? So, "Gideon, be our king." I don't think Gideon was even tempted. A humbled Gideon, like George Washington, refused to be king. **"I shall not rule over you, my son shall not rule over you, but the Lord (who won the battle) shall be your ruler."**

Moving on, and skipping a story about Gideon that reminds us of his human propensity toward idolatry, we find out that Gideon had many wives and concubines. As a matter of fact Gideon had 70 legitimate sons who could have been tempted to say to the people, "Well, you offered our father kingship, and he turned you down, but if the offer still stands one of us can be your king."

When Gideon died, Abimelech, one of Gideon's illegitimate sons, decided he was going to be the king. However, the sons of Gideon's wife's would be in line before him, so he plotted a horrendous occasion when he killed all of Gideon's sons except the youngest, whose name was Jotham. He escaped and hid. And the people of Shechem made Abimelech their king.

Jotham learned that his half-brother Abimelech was king, climbed Mt. Geirzim, looked upon the people of Shechem and shouted, and here is where I will be reading our Scripture text for today from Judges 9:8-15. It is the Parable of the Trees.

Jotham cried out for all to hear: **“One day the trees went out to anoint a king for themselves. They said to the olive tree, ‘Be our king.’**

**“But the olive tree answered, ‘Should I give up my oil, by which both gods and humans are honored, to hold sway over the trees?’**

**“Next, the trees said to the fig tree, ‘Come and be our king.’**

**“But the fig tree replied, ‘Should I give up my fruit, so good and sweet, to hold sway over the trees?’**

**“Then the trees said to the vine, ‘Come and be our king.’**

**“But the vine answered, ‘Should I give up my wine, which cheers both gods and humans, to hold sway over the trees?’**

**“Finally all the trees said to the thorn bush, ‘Come and be our king.’**

**“The thorn bush said to the trees, ‘If you really want to anoint me king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, then let fire come out of the thorn bush and consume the cedars of Lebanon!’**

The olive tree, the fig tree and the vine refused to be king of the trees because they honored God and God’s people. But the blind trees, so wanting a king, went to the thorn bush, debased themselves under such an unworthy plant.

Jotham honored his father Gideon, who would not rule over Israel, for only God can rule. And Jotham was also prophetic.

You see, the newly crowned king Abimelech understood the parable, for the people did not chose that which is wonderful and righteous, but the people chose the most wicked of the Gideon’s sons, a man among men as the thorn bush among trees. They must now serve Abimelech with slavish fear, or he would burn them in his wrath.

It didn’t take long for the people in Shechem to tire of Abimelech and they rebelled against him. And in fulfillment of Jotham’s prophecy, Abimelech turned upon the people with his army and beat down their city wall and slew the people

within. If any person was left in Shechem to tell the tale, they remembered the word of Jotham, **“Fire shall come out of the thorn bush and devour the cedar of Lebanon.”** Abimelech, the thorn bush king, turned his fire on his own subjects.

Only in a parable, a fable, only in our imagination, can trees choose a king. But humans, that part of creation into which God placed his Holy Spirit, can and do choose kings. We choose who or what will rule over us.

Will it be our greed or our pride? Will it be our addictions? Will our fear rule over us? Will we allow another human being to be our ruler? Or will we choose a king that will lead us in the way of righteousness?

When you go to bed tonight, will you be satisfied in the way your king has ruled you? Has your king led you in the way of love, in the way of giving yourself for another, in the way that will wipe the tears from the eyes of the broken? As a ship leaves a track of foam in its wake, does your king lead you in a way that leaves a path that is bright, loving, a way of honor?

Some will choose another way. It is a way that when they go to bed at night they are ill at ease, dissatisfied, fretful, unhappy, because they gave themselves over to the dominion of their own desires, aims, and appetites, worshipping their own dislikes, prejudices and enmities. Instead of the olive, the fig, the vine, they have made the thorn bush their king. Oh, how often, with a folly not unlike that of the fabled trees, we are the deliberate electors and architects of our own unhappiness and distress.

I call your attention to the time when our King was brought before Pilate to face the masses. Pilate cried out, **“Behold your King!”**

And the people answered, **“Away with him! Crucify him!”**

**“Shall I crucify your king?”**

**“We have no king but Caesar!”**

Remember the thorn bush who was made king over the Trees. Remember Abimelech who was made king over Shechem. Remember our petty kings, as the

thorn bush rose up to burn the cedars of Lebanon, and Abimelech turned on his subjects and destroyed them, so do our kings.

**“We have no king but Caesar,”** and that was their fate. Their choice was their doom. About forty years after they rejected Jesus as their king, crying that we have no king but Caesar, Titus, Caesar’s general came with his army, and after a siege of three year duration and of unparalleled suffering and ferocity, the walls of Jerusalem were battered down. A legionary put a torch to one of the golden windows of the temple. The Jews rushed in to save their shrine and died by the thousands until their blood ran down the steps. No king but Caesar! On that day, in A.D. 70, Jewish history came to an end, that is until 1948. There were ashes, blood, carnage, fallen walls, desecrated shrines. **“No king but Caesar!”** And fire came out of the thorn bush.

Let me tell you again the familiar story of the King who was rejected on that day before Pilate. He was hailed as the king coming in peace, down the mountain riding on a donkey. His crown was of thorns; his throne was a tree and in his hands was not the sword and the orb, but nails.

Jesus is the king who, on our account, has emptied himself of all but love. But is this the king we proclaim, and the king we worship, the king that makes no other demand of us other than to love as he loved?

“Christ the King” was the one who left glory and power in order to be a servant. If you will choose Jesus as your King, he will not, as earthly kings do, tell us how to live, but he will show us how to live and that, my friends, is what makes him worthy of being our king.

Of course, our King is most demanding, for his greatest command is to love God, to love our neighbors, and to love our enemies and this command takes all we have. It is the way of life.

Dr. John Brownlee was an Irish Presbyterian who loved Jesus and loved people. He had a gift for healing, and to combine his love for God and for people with his skills, he moved to Malawi to care for AIDS patients.

Jeremy Smith and his wife Shannon volunteered to spend six months working with Dr. Brownlee, and let me tell you one of their stories from the pen of Dr. Smith:

“Everywhere we went, it was agreed that the local people of that area practically worshipped Dr. Brownlee and he’s a living legend there. So we were finally brought to meet him in the women’s ward.

“You have to picture the hospital a bit here. We’re not talking M.D. Anderson. This hospital is a small, one-story building, with one large, dilapidated room filled with patients. The floor is stone. The beds are simple and metal with flimsy mattress— all of them filled with patients. There are also thatch mats on the floor where the overflow patients are sitting. There is a little sink area with some supplies, and that’s about it for a ‘nurses’ station.’

“So we came in, and there was Dr. Brownlee, a little man probably in his mid-60s, looking much older but energetic as well, white hair, bifocals perched on the end of his nose, tie and white coat and open-toed sandals, looking very much at home, sitting casually on one of the beds by a patient writing a note in the ‘chart’ with a pen that was tied by a cord to his own coat so he wouldn’t lose it. He was thrilled to meet us, and we joined him on rounds for the rest of the morning.

“He has an incredible manner with patients, and it’s easy to see why he’s so loved by the local people. After many years, he is totally fluent in their language, and each time he entered a new area of patients, he greets them with warm words and a smile. He also understands the power of touch, and greeted one aged patient who’d been there for weeks by stroking her gray hair and introducing her to us saying, ‘This is my old friend . . .’

“Then we got to a woman sitting in bed, newly diagnosed as HIV positive but obviously dying with advanced AIDS, complaining of abdominal pains that no one could figure out, utterly miserable. There seemed nothing to be done. As Shannon and I ran through differential diagnoses in our heads, he stroked her leg and spoke soothingly to her in her own language, indecipherable to us, but obviously meaningful to her, in that strange melodic singsong voice. He finished

and turned to walk to the next patient but we asked him what he had just told her. He said, ‘Oh, just that God loves you, and he is with you.’”

The King of Love, our king, is with us in our suffering, in our joys, in our temptations, in our successes, in our problems, in our sorrows, even in our death offering us life. This is the king we serve in the church, not a thorn bush that devours, but Jesus Christ who gives and gives and gives. May we all serve him with our lives. Amen.