

The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury
Sermon – October 2, 2005
“Five Smooth Stones”

1 Samuel 17:31-40
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Though some of the details of the David and Goliath story may be hazy, the gist of the story is certainly familiar to most everyone. The story offers us two strikingly different images of David. The first has young David clad with all of Saul’s armor: the bronze helmet, the metal breast plate, the heavy sword strapped over the armor. The poor boy can barely walk under the weight of it. David looks and feels like a character in a New Yorker cartoon.

The armor is a burden. Instead of enabling the young warrior to succeed in his mission, the armor weighs him down, cripples him, leaves him at a terrible disadvantage. The forged battle-wear may have served someone else at an earlier time quite well, but David finds the king’s costume a hindrance. He’d rather see the armor on a heap destined for recycling than on his own back. That’s the first image, David weighed down with Saul’s armor. Can you picture it? It’s almost humorous!

The second image is of the same young David, now stripped to his waist, staff in one hand, sling shot in the other, five smooth stones tucked into his pouch. He is lean and unencumbered. He carries what he needs and nothing more. There is an efficiency about his movement. His primary strength is his faith. Instead of being disabled by his gear, he is empowered by it. Though the king has offered his personal armor, David opts for five smooth stones.

And I think you know the rest of the story!

As I thought about Biblical narratives that inform our understanding of infrastructure, I thought of David going out to do battle with the Philistine giant. Like David, our church is on a mission. To accomplish our mission our church needs a certain amount of armor, a certain amount of structure, a tangle of boards and committees and volunteers and officers. Occasionally, that tangle of infrastructure begins to feel like King Saul's armor. Occasionally, a church looks itself in the mirror, evaluates the armor that has been handed down from previous generations, and begins to peel off those layers of heavy metal, those cumbersome layers of administration in hopes of ending up with the equivalent of a sling shot and five smooth stones.

David's choice of gear, his infra-structure, has everything to do with how he understands his mission. He looks Goliath over from head to toe, then selects five smooth stones!

So, before a church can assemble or modify its infrastructure, it must first be crystal clear about its mission. What is it God is calling us to do today?

Believe it or not, the broad mission of the church has not changed much over the past two thousand years. Personally, I find it refreshing and most helpful to tune in to the way Jesus first laid it out there. He stood right up in front of the elders and the leaders and said,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
to bring good news to the poor,
release to the captives
recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

There it is! There's the mission of the church! Over the centuries, churches have tweaked it and added to it and subtracted from it; but, in a nutshell, this is the vision for ministry that Jesus places on the table.

I had a little fun this week playing with a structure that would empower Jesus' vision for mission. According to his vision, a church would do well to structure itself with a board whose charge would be to wrestle with what it means to bring good news to the poor, and then to rally the congregation to make that happen. I remember the night we were planning the meal for the South Park Inn. Someone suggested mashed potatoes, the kind where you just open a box and add water and stir. One in the group that night had been homeless herself once upon a time, and she kindly pointed out that to proclaim good news to the poor would look a lot more like an Idaho baked potato than the reconstituted flakes we had had in mind! We went with the baked potato! I'd volunteer to serve on that committee!

There would be a second board charged with releasing the captives. Imagine that! Members of this board would be given a big ring of keys, keys designed to unlock the locks that hold people captive either by fear or by illiteracy or by mental illness, or by addiction, or by prejudice. Instead of a nominating committee person calling to ask if you will serve on the board of trustees, you might get a call to serve with those who are releasing the captives. I believe I could invest some energy in such a committee.

There would be a board responsible for opening the eyes of the blind. This group would not put the local opticians out of business. Harvey and Lewis relax! This group would provide the kind of experiences in worship and in fellowship and in hospitality and in outdoor adventures that lead a person to say at last, "Oh, now I see!" "Hallelujah!" "I once was blind; but now I see!"

This group would gather stories of "eye-opening" experiences, spiritual break-throughs, times when goose bumps ran up and down the spine, and would nail those stories on the front doors of the church! Sign me up for that committee!

There would be a board charged with naming the injustices that persist and engaging the congregation to eliminate all forms of oppression. Instead of getting a phone call to serve on deacons, you might get a call inviting you to be a mover and a shaker in the movement to lift the burden of

oppression: the oppression of guilt, the oppression of homelessness, the oppression of racism, the oppression of sexism, the oppression of homophobia.

You see how this goes? Once a church has claimed its mission, the infrastructure almost falls into place by itself! Almost!

If the architects tell us that form follows function, the theologians teach us that infra-structure follows the vision for mission.

Jesus said,
“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
to bring good news to the poor,
to release the captives,
to open the eyes of the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

I say, “Give me a sling shot and five smooth stones. Leave Saul’s armor in the closet. And let’s get a move on because Goliath isn’t going away.”

In the greatest of hope, Amen!