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WHEN THE MUTT SHOWS UP 2 Samuel 16:1-14

While we were visiting Michael and Carissa back in Mississippi this last summer we decided to go on a walk one day because it had cooled off to a balmy 2000 degrees. On our way home from what proved to be a somewhat shorter walk than we anticipated due to the fact that we were melting we approached a house that had a couple of dogs sitting in front unleashed. One of them was a German shepherd who started barking as soon as we got in the same time zone as his house and was looking at us like lunch was arriving. Laurie has something of a thing about German shepherds. This likely goes back to an incident when she was taking our dog, the late Luke, for a walk in the hills near our house and two German shepherds set upon Luke and her. One of them tried to kill Luke and took a big bite which would have been really bad except he miss estimated Luke's size. Luke was mostly fur so he basically got a mouth full of fur. It was traumatic for Laurie, so she has been leery of that breed of dog ever since.

Anyway the closer we got to that house the more aggressive that dog began to get. We crossed the street and actually walked through the front yard of the house across the street to get as far from Cujo as we could get. He watched and snarled at us the entire time as we passed. We watched him with one eye while using the other to find some place of escape should our antagonist breach the borders of his property and come after us. We were really leery of that mutt.

As I read the passage we're going to consider today I thought about the fact that there have been a few people in my life that remind me of that mutt. They bark and snarl and make life unpleasant, making me feel continually on guard around them. Have you ever had a person in your life who had an uncanny ability to push your buttons? Most of us have encountered someone like that, and some of us have to relate on a continual basis with such a person. I recall one from my college days who lived a few doors down from me in a dorm, a guy that was so prickly you could count on ending up in an argument with him if you talked to him for more than a few seconds. We have had several human mutts who lived in our neighborhood. When one of them moved in we went over to welcome him and gave him some cookies Laurie had baked. That was the last positive interaction I had with the guy. I came away from pretty much every subsequent encounter grinding my teeth. He was an annoying, prickly mutt. We will see David deal with

such a person today. It happens in 2 Samuel 16. What we learn from the incident has broad implications for all of our relationships.

DAVID WAS AT A LOW POINT

Betrayal is one of the worst things that can happen to a person. I can tell you from personal experience that being stabbed in the back by someone who was supposedly an ally is not only exceedingly painful, it is actually disorienting. It causes you to question your own judgment and to feel like you can't trust anyone. David experienced the worst kind of betrayal, because it was his own son who betrayed him.

David's son, Absalom, led a rebellion against his father. Absalom plotted against his father for years. This was a cold blooded, eyes wide open, intentional effort to do serious harm to his own father. In fact, Absalom knew that for him to be successful in his effort to take over as king he would have to make sure his own father was killed. It appeared to David that there was a groundswell of support for Absalom, especially among the elites in the royal court. David initially thought if he stayed in Jerusalem he was a dead man. Task one for the rebels would be killing him, so he had to get out of town in a hurry.

David gathered the forces that were loyal to him and headed out of Jerusalem on the road toward Jericho. He was feeling the unimaginable sorrow of rejection by his own son. He was also feeling the sadness of rejection by the people he had worked so hard to faithfully lead for many years. At that point it felt to him like most of the country had turned its back on him. So David was both fearful and emotionally hurting, concerned for his own safety and for the future of his country, as well as the safety of his allies and friends.

One of David's most trusted advisors was named Ahithophel. This guy was the smartest knife in the drawer. He had been faithful to David and had given him great wisdom and advice. Ahithophel was among those who had joined in the rebellion against David. Ziba, a former servant of Saul, informed David that even Mephibosheth, whom David had shown great kindness when everyone expected David to have him killed, had joined forces with Absalom. Mephibosheth would later claim that it was a total lie and his loyalty to David had never wavered. We don't know which was actually true, but at the time David was fleeing Jerusalem the only information he had was that even Mephibosheth had turned on him.

How could this have happened? How could people who had been loyal subjects of David turn on him? Sadly it is a common and predictable turn of events. After

someone has been in leadership for some time negative things start to accumulate. Every leader has opponents, and those opponents will always provide plenty of criticism. No leader is perfect. All of us have flaws, weaknesses and failings, and over time those flaws become more and more apparent. As critics point them out it feels like the flaws begin to accumulate. It's all people can see. In addition no leader could ever measure up to everyone's expectations, nor could they deliver everything that people want. So disappointment is built in to leadership.

This has happened with even the best leaders. George Washington was revered following his military leadership in the American Revolution. But after he became President he faced the inevitable barrage of criticism. One newspaper wrote of him that posterity would, "Not fail to render the just sentence of condemnation on the man who has entailed upon his country deep and incurable public evils." In an early draft of his farewell speech Washington planned to say that many of the newspapers of his day "teemed with all the invective that disappointment, ignorance of the facts and malicious falsehoods could invent, to misrepresent my politics and affections; to wound my reputation and feelings; and to weaken, if not entirely destroy the confidence you had been pleased to repose in me."

Abraham Lincoln suffered the same fate. One editorial from his home state said he was "no more capable of becoming a statesman, even a moderate one, than a braying donkey can become a noble lion...His weak, wishy-washy namby-pamby efforts, imbecile in matter, disgusting in manner, have made us the laughing stock of the whole world." Leading orator of the day Edward Everett said Lincoln was "a person of very inferior cast of character, wholly unequal to the crisis." General George McClellan called him "the original gorilla." Famous abolitionist Elizabeth Cady Stanton said if Lincoln were reelected, "I shall immediately leave the country for the Fiji Islands." David suffered some of the same kinds of things many leaders have suffered, except it was far worse.

This episode occurs during one of the lowest moments of his life. David was wounded in soul, uncertain of his future, discouraged, hurting and fearing for his life and the lives of his friends. At that moment a mutt arrived.

SHIMEI KICKED DAVID WHEN HE WAS DOWN

As he and his troops near the village of Bahurim they encounter a man named Shimei. He was from the same clan as Saul. He had never gotten over the fact that David had replaced Saul as king. He felt about David a little like I feel about Dean Spanos, owner of the Los Angeles Chargers, also known as Lucifer. David had been in power for years, but Shimei had never let go of his bitterness. Talk about

holding onto a grudge, after all those years Shimei was thrilled that David was being run out of Jerusalem.

You get a feel for the level of his resentment when you realize that if Absalom prevailed it wouldn't return the throne to a descendant of Saul. It would just be another member of the David family on the throne. So there would be no real advantage to Shimei or his clan. But his hatred of David was so deep he didn't care about that. He just wanted to see David hurt.

Last week the Union Tribune published an article by a sportswriter from St. Louis expressing sympathy for San Diego football fans following the perfidious decision by Lucifer Spanos to move the Chargers to Los Angeles. He could sympathize because last year the owner of the Rams moved them from St. Louis to LA. He wrote about the glee he felt in watching the Rams playing in front of thousands of empty seats. He expressed something that is exactly what I feel. His favorite NFL team was whatever team was playing against the Rams. My favorite team is now whoever is playing the Chargers. Yes, even if it's the Oakland/Las Vegas Raiders. The Charger opponent winning won't really benefit me in any way, it will just hurt the Chargers and Lucifer Spanos. That's good enough. I just want him to hurt. Rick, bitterness is not godly. Yes, but I'm not bitter. I just want justice.

That was what was going on with Shimei. David's predicament would not benefit him at all, but in his bitterness he just wanted David to hurt. Anything that caused him harm was reason for celebration for Shimei. As David and his people neared Bahurim on their escape from Jerusalem, Shimei, who is from that town, shows up. He starts yelling at David and firing rocks at him. He used very colorful language as he did so, firing off Hebrew equivalents of F-bombs in numerous creative combinations. Even worse he claimed that God was in favor of David being run out of town. "The Lord has given the kingdom into the hands of your son Absalom" he said in verse 8. He claimed that this whole thing was God getting back at him for "all the blood you shed in the household of Saul."

David did not unjustly kill any of Saul's family, and he took the throne because God ordained it. So none of that was true. Have you ever been falsely accused of something in public? It is a terrible experience. The situation was made even worse for David by what Shimei said at the end of verse 8. "You have come to ruin because you are a murderer." Shimei was claiming that David had murdered members of Saul's clan, which was not true. But it was absolutely true that what was happening to David was because he had someone killed. Nathan the prophet had told him because he had ordered noble Uriah killed the sword would never

depart from his house. He said one from his own family would bring that sword, and now that was happening. So as Shimei yelled this David was likely buried with shame and remorse because it was true, even though Shimei didn't understand how it was true. Shimei was truly a mutt.

DAVID DID NOT RETALIATE

David was at one of the lowest points of his life. What he needed was some support and encouragement. Shimei gave him accusation, ridicule and glee over his misfortune. When you go through something like what David experienced that day your heart cries out for vindication. When someone is falsely accusing you or publicly claiming that God is condemning you because of your terrible failings and flaws, you feel this deep desire to see them get egg on their face. You hope, you pray that God will show up and visibly smack them down and show just how wrong and crummy they actually are. That's the normal human reaction to situations like this.

Years ago I was listening to the radio as I was driving and I heard an interview with former Norte Dame football coach and ESPN analyst, Lou Holtz. I respect him for his life and character, even though I frequently disagreed with his opinions. In this interview he was talking about coaches dealing with getting fired. He related a story from his own life. He was coaching at the University of Arkansas and had 5 successful years. Then he had one mediocre year and was shocked when he was informed by the athletic director that he was fired. It was totally unwarranted and he was completely blindsided. He couldn't believe the AD would do this to him. He was angry. He stewed and began thinking of all the blistering things he would say at the press conference the next day about what a terrible decision it was, about how poorly he was being treated and about how the AD was a terrible person. That is normal human reaction. I will tell you in a few minutes what happened.

In David's case one of his most loyal men, Abishai, expressed the normal reaction to a jerk like Shimei. In verse 9 he said, "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over and cut off his head." See, I told you Shimei was a mutt. Only Shimei thought he was so bad he was like a dead mutt. Calling someone a dead dog was classic idiom of that day. It was their equivalent to calling someone a piece of excrement. It was as much of an insult as you could utter. Abishai's solution was simple and neat. Let's cut off the head of this mutt because he richly deserves it.

David's response was amazing. Instead of anger and vindictiveness there was calm and peace. He basically told Abishai to leave Shimei alone. This was a lot more than "sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." Shimei was supplying the stones as well as the names, but David refused to fight back. He believed that God was bigger than Shimei. The only reason Shimei was able to curse David and throw rocks at him was God allowed him to do it. I think David may even have felt that Shimei was justified in cursing him because of the terrible sin against Uriah. At the very least David rested in the fact that God definitely allowed Shimei to act. If God did not want that to happen he could certainly have put a stop to it.

David was demonstrating some very new covenant behavior here. In Matthew 5:38-39 Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also." An eye for an eye seems fair to me. A person should get what he deserves. That's why the normal human reaction to being falsely accused or attacked wants vindication. We want the evil attacker to get hurt. But Jesus said when someone insults you, merely let it go and offer them the chance to insult you again. That is what true righteousness does, because true righteousness is not about protecting self, it is about loving the other person and seeking his good. And that is exactly what David did here.

To see how far David went with this look at 2 Samuel 19. Absalom has been defeated. The rebellion is over and David is on his way back to Jerusalem to be restored to the throne. As he is about to cross the Jordan River a bunch of people come out to welcome him and escort him to Jerusalem. Guess who leads the pack. It is none other than that good old foul mouthed mutt, Shimei! The dead dog himself. In verses 19-20 he says to David, "May my lord not hold me guilty. Do not remember how your servant did wrong on the day my lord the king left Jerusalem. May the king put it out of his mind. For I your servant know that I have sinned, but today I have come here as the first from the tribes of Joseph to come down and meet my lord the king."

How sincere does that apology ring to you? It's as hollow as a politicians promise that the new tax they propose will be temporary. This was nothing but a poorly disguised attempt to save Shimei's crummy skin. That was exactly how Abishai saw it. Once again Abishai wanted to cut off Shimei's head.

Which of Shimei's comments to David expressed what he really thought? Was it his profanity laced denunciation of David in chapter 16 when he thought he didn't

have anything to fear from David, or was it his smarmy apology in chapter 19 when he was terrified that David was going to exact revenge against him? Obviously his verbal attack in chapter 16 was what he really thought about David. David knew that Shimei was like an athlete or an on air personality who in an unguarded moment says something that is politically incorrect. In response to the ensuing furor he issues an apology, but you know very well that what he's really sorry about is that the whole thing blew up in his face. He still thinks what he initially said, he'll just be smarter about keeping it out of the public arena.

David was not stupid. He could see through Shimei's greasy apology as easily as we can. In fact we know for certain that he saw right through Shimei. Later when David was about to die and gave instructions to Solomon before he took over as king, he warned Solomon about Shimei. He knew very well that nothing had changed and that inside he was an enemy of David. Nevertheless, in this incident David merely says to Shimei in verse 23, "you shall not die." David would not take revenge. He did not take any action against Shimei whatsoever. Abishai wanted to give Shimei what he deserved. But what David did was give a glimpse of a new way to live, the new covenant way of life that is the polar opposite of an eye for an eye, of you get what you deserve. He is giving a glimpse of the way of grace in relationship.

To understand how remarkable this is look back at 1 Samuel 25. You may recall in that incident David and his men had served as a private security force protecting the flocks and herds of wealthy Israelites from bandits and predators. David had requested that one of them, a man named Nabal, remunerate them for their efforts. Nabal's response was to deny the request, and to do it by insulting David and essentially accusing him of being an outlaw, suggesting that maybe he was the problem not a solution. According to verse 13 when David received Nabal's insulting reply he told his men, "Each of you strap on your sword." Nabal was going to pay dearly for his arrogance. Fortunately Abigail, Nabal's gorgeous wife, found out what her husband had done and knew there was going to be trouble. She headed David off and made amends on her husband's behalf. In verses 33-34 David said to her, "May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands. Otherwise, as surely as the Lord, the God of Israel lives, who has kept me from harming you, if you had not come quickly to meet me, not one male belonging to Nabal would have been left alive by daybreak." Nabal insulted David less severely than Shimei did, and David's response to the insult was that he was not only going to kill Nabal, he was going to kill every man in his family. Only Abigail's gracious intervention kept that from happening.

When Shimei launched his ugly attack against David something had changed. God has worked in David's life and he has grown. He had learned a new way of living. It may be that Abigail was used by God to teach David this new way of living. Or God has used some of the hardships and failures of David's life to teach him, but this is a very different man who responds in a very different way. David responded as Jesus taught us we are to respond, with grace and forgiveness.

IMPLICATIONS

NEW COVENANT RELATING:

MEANS RETURNING GOOD FOR EVIL

There is more significance to David's encounters with Shimei than merely an odd historical incident. Out of all the things God could have recorded about David's life why would he pick this incident involving a man about whom we would otherwise have known nothing? Who was Shimei? He was not an important historical person, so it seems fair to conclude that something about his engagement with David is significant. The writer found the grace David extended to a man who still hated him to be astounding. This is the grace that Jesus said is characteristic of true righteousness. It is what Jesus himself demonstrated to all of us and now seeks to reproduce in us.

What forms our relating is the way Jesus relates to us. He does not give what we deserve, but instead he gives us grace, love and kindness. Paul put it this way in Romans 12:17, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil." In verse 21 he wrote, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." When someone hurts us or treats us unkindly or unfairly, the normal human response is to return the hurt or the unkindness. Hurting people, being unfair or unkind is by definition evil. So when we respond the natural human way we are overcome by evil. Evil has won in our lives and our responses. The new covenant way is to overcome the other person's evil with good.

In Matthew 5:44 Jesus said we should love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. This is the way that Jesus relates to us. Recently Laurie was taking care of Ella, and our little granddaughter was not having her best day. She didn't sleep enough so she was a little cranky. She wanted to be held most of the time, and at some points she would just be fussy and would have a temper outburst for no apparent reason. At lunch she had some grated cheese and some raspberries to eat, among other things, but she started just throwing it on the floor for fun. She made a huge mess. Laurie patiently held her, was patient with her, and after lunch calmly cleaned up the mess. She didn't get fussy and cranky with her, she didn't

get upset with her for making a mess. She knew that to love that cute little one year old meant being patient, loving and kind. It meant not returning to her what she was giving out. Isn't interesting that we can understand that with a little child, but then forget it when it comes to grown ups?

As you know the day we were to fly to Seattle to attend the funeral for Laurie's mother on the way to the airport I realized I had forgotten my wallet...again. When I told her this she initially laughed, thinking I was trying to pull a joke. That was not her second reaction. She had an instant vision of us missing the flight and not arriving in time for the funeral. She was understandably not happy with me. She didn't say a lot but I could feel a torrent of frustration inundating me. It's amazing how much a person can communicate non-verbally. She restrained her verbal communication because she didn't want to say anything she might feel bad about later. But I could see how upset she was, and she was upset at me. Do you know what the natural response is when someone is upset with you? It is to give right back what you are receiving. It is a form of eye for eye. I could feel it. I could feel the desire to let her know I was upset with her right back. After all, I didn't intend to do this and I felt really bad about it. I felt stupid, because I was stupid. Which made the need of the moment grace, compassion and love. That's right, shouldn't a loving supportive wife be understanding and encouraging when her husband has messed up and feels really bad about it? I felt that temptation to lash out, try pouring some guilt on her for her failure to love her poor husband. It was not rational, but it was very human. That is the natural thing for us. But the new covenant thing is to not return to another person what they give, but to give grace, patience, kindness and love no matter we receive from them.

Anyone, even someone you like or love, can turn into a mutt. They can treat you in ways that really push your buttons. The temptation is to respond in kind, to give right back what you feel they are giving you. New covenant relating is very different. It means giving right back to them what God is giving you. And that is continual grace, kindness, love and blessing. How do you think your arguments will go if you follow David's example? They are going to be calm and rather short affairs. What creates long conflicts is the eye for an eye approach. If you are unfair, abrupt, angry at me, then I will send unfair, abrupt and angry right back. How different it will be when we live to overcome evil with good.

REQUIRES FOCUSING ON WHAT LIFE IS ABOUT

However to do that we must have a laser like focus on what our lives are all about. I submit to you they are to be about glorifying God and loving people. That is what we are on this planet to do. Our difficulty is that we lose track of that. We think our

lives are about protecting ourselves, about making ourselves feel good, about bringing honor to ourselves. When we do that if someone treats us in an unkind way then we are going to lash back at them. They are attacking the thing that my life is all about, which is me! When we remember that our lives are about glorifying God and loving people then if they attack me it doesn't really matter. My life is about something else entirely. I can still glorify God with my response and I can still love the other person.

Last year I was watching a playoff hockey game. It was a hard hitting game that got pretty chippy, lots of penalties called. Late in the game one player hit another with a blatant cross check in the back and when the victim whirled to face him he added a shovel the face. You could see the victim prepare to hit back, then he stopped and did nothing. He resisted the urge to hit back because it was the last period and the score was tied. Had he hit back both his attacker and he would have been sent to the penalty box. But he did nothing, because he focused on the real goal of winning the game. His team got a power play because he kept his eyes on the goal. When we keep our eyes on the goal of glorifying God and loving people then we will be able to get past the behavior of the mutts we encounter and treat them with grace and kindness regardless of how they treat us. In fact, this is the only way we can be the peacemakers God wants us to be. It is the only way we can increase peace in this world and in our own lives.

COMES FROM CONFIDENCE IN GOD

The crucial words in this passage are in verses 12-13. As Shimei was firing rocks at him and swearing at him on one of the worst days of his life David said, "Leave him alone; let him curse, for the Lord has told him to. It may be that the Lord will look upon my misery and restore to me his covenant blessing instead of his curse today." David put his life in God's hands. If God wanted that guy to curse him, then let him curse. If God wanted to put him back on the throne, then God would do so. David was confident in what God wanted to do.

That confidence came through years of difficulty. It derived from a startling victory over the massive Philistine warrior Goliath, through years of being hunted by King Saul when by any reasonable analysis David should have been killed, yet God protected him, through the fact that after all the turmoil of those years David did end up on the throne against all odds just as God had said would happen. He had learned that when he took matters into his own hands and thought it was up to him to make everything come out right, bad things almost always happened. He had learned that God could be trusted.

If someone is unfair, unkind, angry, unloving toward us, do we see ourselves as being in that person's hands, or in God's hands? Is God more powerful than that evil person? If he is then we can put our trust in him and focus on pursuing the real goal of our lives rather than just trying to protect ourselves or get even.

Our daughter and son in law are trying to buy a house here. Some people have said they are crazy to live here because of the exorbitant cost of houses. They have also been warned that the housing market is likely to slump and they might buy at the peak. We have not advised them. I've told them if they want to make smart financial decisions they should get my advice then do the opposite. But when they pressed us for our thoughts I did tell them that we were certain the only thing that could torpedo the housing market was if ever bought a house. Sure enough in 1990 we were able to buy a house, and the market promptly tanked. However, today the market value of our home is nearly 3 times what we paid for it. I have confidence in the housing market in coastal San Diego county. If you trust the market over time you don't worry about fluctuations. You trust that over the long haul it will come out all right. Similarly, if we have confidence in God we won't worry about what people do in the short run. We know that over the long haul God will make it come out all right, so we don't have to be controlled by the things they do.

Remember the story I told you about Lou Holtz. He fully intended to return evil for evil after he was unfairly fired. But his wife had a different idea. She strongly encouraged him to say nothing negative, but to merely thank the AD for the opportunity he had to serve as the coach and to wish them well in the future. It was the last thing he wanted to do, but he did it. He was gracious and positive in his response to the situation. He got a job as the coach at the University of Minnesota where he had a couple of good years. Then he was contacted by Norte Dame. They wanted to interview him for their head coach position. Norte Dame was his dream job. He couldn't believe they were interested in him. But he interviewed and they offered him the job. He took it, but asked why they were interested in him. The AD told him it was because one of the people he really respected was the AD at Arkansas. He had asked him who he thought they should look at. He recommended Holtz and told him that firing Lou had been a big mistake.

Famed 20th century French film maker Robert Bresson said, "Make visible what, without you, might never have been seen." That is a great goal. Make visible the grace and glory of God that without you might never have been seen by others.

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