July 15, 2018

1 Samuel 25:23-35

Bible Characters You Never Heard Of: Abigail

Rev. Kerry Smith

Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

1 Samuel 25:23-35 Common English Bible

When Abigail saw David, she quickly got off her donkey and fell facedown before him, bowing low to the ground.  She fell at his feet and said, “Put the blame on me, my master! But please let me, your servant, speak to you directly. Please listen to what your servant has to say.  Please, my master, pay no attention to this despicable man Nabal. He’s exactly what his name says he is! His name means fool, and he is foolish! But I myself, your servant, didn’t see the young men that you, my master, sent. I pledge, my master, as surely as the Lord lives and as you live, that the Lord has held you back from bloodshed and taking vengeance into your own hands! But now let your enemies and those who seek to harm my master be exactly like Nabal!  Here is a gift, which your servant has brought to my master. Please let it be given to the young men who follow you, my master.  Please forgive any offense by your servant. The Lord will definitely make an enduring dynasty for my master because my master fights the Lord’s battles, and nothing evil will be found in you throughout your lifetime.  If someone chases after you and tries to kill you, my master, then your life will be bound up securely in the bundle of life by the Lord your God, but he will fling away your enemies’ lives as from the pouch of a sling.  When the Lord has done for my master all the good things he has promised you, and has installed you as Israel’s leader, don’t let this be a blot or burden on my master’s conscience, that you shed blood needlessly or that my master took vengeance into his own hands. When the Lord has done good things for my master, please remember your servant.” David said to Abigail, “Bless the Lord God of Israel, who sent you to meet me today!  And bless you and your good judgment for preventing me from shedding blood and taking vengeance into my own hands today!  Otherwise, as surely as the Lord God of Israel lives—the one who kept me from hurting you—if you hadn’t come quickly and met up with me, there wouldn’t be one single one who urinates on a wall left come morning.”  Then David accepted everything she had brought for him. “Return home in peace,” he told her. “Be assured that I’ve heard your request and have agreed to it.”

Spiderman is told “with great power comes great responsibility,” but our Bible story today is going to remind us that with great power comes great temptation to violence. This is a story of two men who act like fools, filled with arrogance, bent on destruction, and ready to descend into a spiral of bloodshed and vengeance. In that culture that said women had no power, Abigail leads a peace delegation and stops a war between the two most powerful men in the region. Abigail is courageous and through her actions, she saves many lives and helps one of the men see the error of his ways.

The Bible says Abigail was clever and beautiful, but her husband was surly and mean. His name was Nabal which means foolish in Hebrew. He made a very good living and he owned 3,000 sheep and 1,000 goats. There is another character in our story, King David, but our story is before he was king. David and his men have been hanging out in the wilderness hiding from King Saul who is trying to kill David. In the wilderness, David sees Nabal’s flocks and shepherds and with nothing to do, David and his men guard Nabal’s sheep from robbers.

When David’s camp starts to run out of food, David sends ten messengers to Nabal sharing how they had been protecting his shepherds. They ask for food in exchange for their protection. They address Nabal three times with the word peace and they call themselves Nabal’s servants. It is the shearing time, a traditional time of hospitality, but Nabal refuses them and even screams at them. He claims David is a nobody, no better than an escaped slave. When the messengers repeat Nabal’s words to David, he was angry. Sometimes anger is good because God can use our anger to show us what is unjust in the world and what God is calling you to do about it. However, David’s anger was not that kind of anger.

Enraged, David tells 400 men to strap on their swords and prepare for war. Exodus 21:24 says those famous words, “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot”. It means don’t take any more than what was taken from you. If somebody took your eye, you have no right to take their life. The most you can take is an eye. Don’t escalate your assaults against one another.

A servant tells Abigail how Nabal has insulted and dishonored David, and what danger they are in. Abigail is a woman of wealth and privilege but a servant trusted her to help. Abigail gathers a bunch of food, 200 loaves of bread, 5 sheep, 200 fig cakes and more, as a peace offering. Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God” (Matthew 5:9). David says Nabal has repaid him evil instead of good. When we choose evil instead of good, it is as foolish as Nabal. When we act a fool like Nabal did, we create brokenness. It is easy for us to name the truly evil in our world’s history. Evil people like Hitler and Stalin, members of the KKK and evil actions like apartheid, ethnic cleansing, and separating children from their mothers at the border. But we all have mean-spirited foolishness and the evil that is a result. We may think that peacemaking and turning from vengeance is the work of diplomats and Nobel prize winners, but we are called like Abigail to stand in the gap between foolishness and violence. When we choose to do that good, our actions are lining up with what God is doing.

Abigail decisively takes action and as she is on her way to see David. She runs into David and his soldiers are on their way to kill Nabal and every single male in his household. They are filled with rage and they want revenge. David says, “May God deal harshly with me” … if by morning I leave alive even one single male who belong to Nabal (1 Samuel 25:22). You can hear the smoke that is coming out of his ears. Vengeance will be his and he is going to kill all the males of Nabal’s household.

Then we have our scripture for today: When Abigail saw David, she quickly got off her donkey and fell facedown before him, bowing low to the ground.  She fell at his feet and said, “Put the blame on me, my master! But please let me, your servant, speak to you directly. Please listen to what your servant has to say.  Please, my master, pay no attention to this despicable man Nabal. He’s exactly what his name says he is! His name means fool, and he is foolish! But I myself, your servant, didn’t see the young men that you, my master, sent. I pledge, my master, as surely as the Lord lives and as you live, that the Lord has held you back from bloodshed and taking vengeance into your own hands! But now let your enemies and those who seek to harm my master be exactly like Nabal!  Here is a gift, which your servant has brought to my master. Please let it be given to the young men who follow you, my master.  Please forgive any offense by your servant. The Lord will definitely make an enduring dynasty for my master because my master fights the Lord’s battles, and nothing evil will be found in you throughout your lifetime.  If someone chases after you and tries to kill you, my master, then your life will be bound up securely in the bundle of life by the Lord your God, but he will fling away your enemies’ lives as from the pouch of a sling.  When the Lord has done for my master all the good things he has promised you, and has installed you as Israel’s leader, don’t let this be a blot or burden on my master’s conscience, that you shed blood needlessly or that my master took vengeance into his own hands. When the Lord has done good things for my master, please remember your servant.” David said to Abigail, “Bless the Lord God of Israel, who sent you to meet me today!  And bless you and your good judgment for preventing me from shedding blood and taking vengeance into my own hands today!  Otherwise, as surely as the Lord God of Israel lives—the one who kept me from hurting you—if you hadn’t come quickly and met up with me, there wouldn’t be one single one who urinates on a wall left come morning.”  Then David accepted everything she had brought for him. “Return home in peace,” he told her. “Be assured that I’ve heard your request and have agreed to it.”

Abigail’s words to David rattle my independent female self. I want Abigail to tell David he is being a fool like her husband, but she repeatedly calls David master, which can also be translated as lord. She refers to herself as his servant. Abigail takes all the blame. David has vowed the death of all the men in Nabal’s household, and a woman is now taking all the blame. But, she does not hesitate to say where actual blame belongs and she does not sugarcoat the truth about her husband. In the translation I read she says her husband is despicable, but that word can also be translated as worthless. She begs forgiveness for her husband’s foolishness, and she talks about God’s purpose for David’s life. If David had only sent the messengers to her, this would have all been avoided. Abigail affirmed David’s calling as future king, she begged forgiveness for her husband’s foolishness, and pleaded with David to spare her people. Was this the only way to change David’s behavior? I don’t know. I do know that humility and peacemaking go together.

And then we have David’s response to Abigail. David says that God has spoken through her. Without her actions and words, he would have killed every single man in Nabal’s house. Abigail was an ordinary person who stopped a war. The fact that a woman is the hero in the Bible is unusual. So, instead of getting frustrated at the way that Abigail acts, I need to remember that although there are some notable exceptions, women in the Bible usually are secondary characters in men’s stories. I don’t like the deferential language that Abigail uses, but it is Abigail who is the clear decision maker and the action taker. Abigail is intelligent, direct, persuasive, and decisive. What is unusual is that David recognizes and lifts up Abigail and her actions. David sees God working through Abigail and speaking through her.

Abigail refused to stand by and accept the unfolding disastrous events. She believed God wanted her to make a difference. We believe that God wants us to make a difference. God wants us to be about compassion and not vengeance. We can become peacemakers in a world given to conflict between extremes. God may show you something to say or do to bring peace in a situation. When that happens, don’t worry about what others may say. Act with holy boldness. Abigail didn’t pay attention to the prejudice of her culture. Her culture told her she had no power, but she knew her husband was making a mistake. Abigail reminds me that I am not inferior to anyone else. No matter what my culture says about my race or sex or education or immigration status, I am made in the image of God and I am God’s beloved child. You are made in the image of God and you are God’s beloved child.

When Abigail gets home, Nabal is throwing a party fit for a king and he is drunk. The next morning Abigail tells him what happened, and Nabal’s heart dies within him and he becomes like a stone. Ten days later, he dies. When David finds out Nabal has died, he sends a messenger to Abigail asking her to marry him. It seems that David liked that strong woman who took decisive action and prevented a war. The woman who lifted up a mirror to his actions, who showed him what a hot-head he was being.

I don’t like that some women may learn about Abigail and think that her behavior justifies staying in an unsafe, harmful relationship. Abuse is never okay. Domestic violence and sexual assault affect millions of people across our nation regardless of age, economic status, race, religion, or education. Young women between the ages of 16 and 24 experience the highest rate of intimate partner violence and sexual assault. Children exposed to violence are more likely to attempt suicide, abuse drugs and alcohol, run away from home, engage in teenage prostitution and commit sexual assault crimes.[[1]](#footnote-1) Abuse is not okay, it is never deserved, and if you are in that situation or know someone who is, please reach out to me or to Genesis Shelter.

The hard part about this story and our own lives is that fools may never be brought around to wisdom and the righteous may insist on acting like the sinners we all are. A peacemaker stands in between and witnesses to God’s alternative way when the ways of the world tempt us. There is folly in living only out of our self-centered nature. There is sin in acting only on impulse. We have power and we are challenged by God to use that power to make peace.

There was a married couple that was having an argument. They were so angry with each other. Each one was being stubborn as they shouted at each other one moment and then were silently glaring at one another the next. They couldn’t remember why they had gotten married, they didn’t even like one another. They lived in the country and were driving into town. They passed a mule, a stubborn, lonely mule. The one who was driving glared at the other and asked, “Is that your relative?” The passenger looked out the window at the mule and said, “Yes. By marriage.”[[2]](#footnote-2) May we use our power to make peace. We live in a world constantly needing restraint from violence, and we could always do with more Abigails.[[3]](#footnote-3) May we load up our donkey with good things, speak to the hearts of those bent on revenge, and appeal to the highest sense of whom God made them to be.[[4]](#footnote-4) May we use our power to make peace. Amen.

1. http://nnedv.org/downloads/Policy/AD14/AD14\_DVSA\_Factsheet.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Story found here: https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/restorative-justice-5-abigail-the-peacemaker-anne-grant-sermon-on-ot-characters-40255?page=1&wc=800 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary. 1 Samuel. Birch, Bruce C. P. 1171. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/restorative-justice-5-abigail-the-peacemaker-anne-grant-sermon-on-ot-characters-40255?page=1&wc=800 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)