

Slaying Giants and Calming the Seas: Do We Dare?

Calvary United Methodist Church June 21, 2009

I Samuel 17:1-49: The story of David slaying Goliath

Mark 4:35-41: The story of Jesus calming the seas

Would you agree with me that we are the hands of God?

That it is when we allow God to use us that the realm of God on earth as it is in heaven begins to take hold?

That it is as we love our neighbor as we love ourselves that we can model what it is to also love God?

That love can cast out all our fears?

Can we agree that Christ, this Divine One who took on human form, empowers us to step out onto the unknown waters to bring calm to the suffering?

Can we agree that the most effective witness of this One who promised life in all its abundance is through our actions rather than our words, through the living of our lives more than the rituals in our religion?

Do we believe this?

Nah, I am not sure we really do. If we did we would be going up against the oppressive giants among us in our midst just like David did. We would be calming the seas of fear and doubt and pain and suffering like Jesus did. I would like to suggest that the two main ideas of our biblical texts be used as metaphors; the Goliaths in our midst is anything that challenges us and threatens our very survival while, the storms are found in the suffering around us. In the first case, David is our courageous model who confronted Goliath with courage and his slingshot. And in the latter, it was Jesus who stepped up and, in the face of fear, calmed the storm.

For us to apply the David and Goliath story to our lives today I would suggest that the giants, the Goliaths among us, do not take the form of physically huge men on a battlefield. Anyone can be a David but it requires courageous people of faith who are willing to liberate the people by saying, "Choose me. I will step out in faith because I know God steps out with me." And, the physical winds and roar of the churned up seas today threatening us is that which calls out for peace and an end to the suffering.

David was responding to the cries of suffering of his people. A war was raging and the challenge was put forth, "Send out your best or else you will all die." Do we dare respond to this challenge?

Most of you know that in my work on the campus at the University of Penn and as a public theologian I watch the culture wars and the cultural shapers and my work especially centers on sexual justice or another way of saying it is body justice. From my vantage point I know a huge Goliath among us and its real name is Fear of the Body. Or erotophobia. It stalks in our churches. It stalks in our media. And all the while it gloats about being the opposite; "Look at me! I am unafraid of anything!" It insists it is liberated, and is comfortable with seeking purity. But this Goliath "is a liar and the truth is not in him." For lurking behind its self assuredness and self-righteousness is repression although it calls this morality. Often it disguises itself as Christianity but it is actually misogyny and has racial implications. It purports to be moral but is instead intent upon keeping women in their place and to make both women and men afraid and ashamed of our natural bodily impulses.

Unlike the Goliath of the Scriptures, who was a hulking man who boasted of his muscles, our lying giant, (this fear of the body,) actually morphs into a variety of forms and never admits that it is fueled and energized by fear. But I see the impact on the lives of young adults, men and women. Let me list a number of the problems and obstacles this fear takes so you get a sense of how huge and how powerful this Silent Goliath is in our culture.

Fear of the body:

Goliath lies to our children in Abstinence Only education costing us \$1.3 billion dollars since 1996. (1) It tells them physical intimacy is dangerous and life-threatening, that they are tainted and shameful if they express any interest in intimate exploration. In Nevada, using federal tax dollars, it was put on billboards that girls we “dirty and cheap” if they aren’t pure. (2)

This Fear of the Body movement provides no ongoing age-appropriate information that will help them put into context their body’s hormonal changes, or understand better relationships or ethical decision-making. There is no intimacy training or even language skills. As a result, they can neither appropriately initiate nor decline physical relationships and are unprepared.

Then to be sure to punish those who are not appropriately fearful Goliath designs ways to withhold access to easily affordable contraception putting it behind locked cases in stores and passing laws restricting morning after pills (Plan B). And for those “shameful” women who have violated the purity codes, Goliath twists a medically safe procedure that is usually a morally appropriate, private choice for a woman and makes it into some supposed shameful act of “murder.” This Fear of the Body movement prefers compulsory motherhood for a 15 year old than for her to finish her schooling and go to college.

This Goliath passes laws that make it possible for young people to own guns but not vibrators. It pushes the FCC to make sure we do not hear the word butt or boob on TV but then promotes the cultural fantasy that there is only bliss after there is a monogamous, heterosexual and married relationship.

It stigmatizes and humiliates those in the sexual minority communities and turns the other way at the violence perpetuated especially against the Trans community.

Then, in the guise of being concerned for young people the bogus question is asked “Why must we include sex in everything?” But the real question according to one sexologist is “Why must we delete eroticism from everything?” (3) The answer, my friends, is because we are afraid, afraid of the erotic, afraid of passion, afraid of pleasure, afraid of our bodies. This is the Goliath in our midst and living in our churches.

Christian Fear of the Body

But the Christian Church Fathers down through the ages have perpetuated this fear (usually by denigrating women.) For example it was St Augustine who said women are “*not* the image of God,” Tertullian who said women “are the devil’s gateway”; St Jerome who said, “Woman is the gate of the devil, the path of wickedness, the sting of the serpent, in a word a perilous object.” and various Catholic popes and leaders of the Reformation through the ages were to varying degrees afraid of the power of women, afraid of the power of pleasure, afraid of losing control. One so-called Christian group

says “We repudiate...misguided assumptions that pleasure produces human fulfillment and that such fulfillment is the main object of life.” Concerned Women of America “A Christian Women's Declaration “ (4) And so they have built a theology that removed Jesus from the fleshly world of Palestine where he ate, drank, sweat, bled, cried, and touched women and then spiritualized him into an untouchable Savior. They took the sacred out of our bodies and made it carnal flesh that would only lead us astray unless we are hyper-vigilant. Incarnation stopped meaning the divine taking on human flesh and became instead a divinity that we cannot access except through great self-denial of the flesh. When is the last time you heard a sermon or a prayer praising the wondrous possibilities of intimacy and passion, or that celebrated our bodies and all our senses? Where is the message of blessing on bodily pleasure?

The Stormy Seas of Suffering

But when the Giant of Fear rules the culture then the second metaphor comes into play: the winds of trauma and suffering blow through our land. Like a mighty storm that pushes the waves of the sea to their highest we have suffering among us as a result of this fear of the body;

- *One of the highest teen birth rates in the world. Babies raising babies.

- *Teen women becoming mothers before they are ready effectively shooting down most possibilities for her to pursue their own dreams, usually before they even know what they are.

- *Young people doing what comes naturally as humans but because they are sexually ignorant getting infections and diseases and rushed, ill-considered marriages that do not pass the stage of hormonal rush.

- *And, did you know that around 80% of all first time sexual encounters of college students happen under the influence of alcohol or drugs?

- *There's censorship of a whole variety of liberties for consenting adults who are in full control of their faculties and capable of making their own choices for themselves.

- *There is such passionate and irrational rhetoric that it promotes turning deaf ears to the gay-bashing. It is rhetoric that gives justification for the mentally unbalanced to murder physicians in their churches or outside their clinics and then encourages fear-mongering leaders to self-righteously blame the victim and say “Well, he is just reaping what he sowed.”

- *And on the campus I hear stories that alarm me. Young adults, age 18-22 who have no language or skills in this area of physical relating, who have no idea how to be sexual adults without also engaging in the objectification that is prevalent in the hook up culture.

- *In a fraternity discussion I asked the men, “What would you do if one of your frat brothers told you he was going to get drugs in order to force himself on a woman. One man said, “That would be illegal.” Another one said “That would be immoral” One said “I would go tell her.” I thought that was very strange that he wouldn't first confront the frat brother with whom he was living! But then one guy said, “Hey, if she doesn't say no then it is a yes.” And the rest of the men sat silent. And we wonder why 1 in 4 women will be sexually assaulted before she graduates from college. 1 in 4. Suffering!

*There is such fear of the body that there are 1600 chastity balls a year where young fearful teenage women incestuously pledge to their fathers to be “pure.” And the virginity industry has a ready market to sell chastity rings and virginity vouchers and ballroom dresses. We have women being encouraged to give up their personhood and their dreams in favor of a patriarchal system that sets up females as baby-makers, but not decision-makers, pregnant but not powerful, silent and submissive but not bold and courageous. However, let us be clear that this confusion of the moral compass with virginity is for young white women, specifically girls.

*And let’s not forget that these same girls are aware that they must be sexy but never sexual and this sometimes means some decide not eat in order to keep the appearance of prepubescence. But of course, women of color can never meet the standard of such sexual purity because of the racist sexual stereotypes in our culture. And when virginity is put on a pedestal and a whole fearful, fevered abstinence movement is intent upon getting everyone else to bow down before it as to an idol. They are certain that the only moral compass is sexuality, especially the young woman’s. The moral compass is not honesty, or integrity or the quality of our relationships, or our righteous living but on the so-called virginal status.

Can you hear the pain and suffering yet? Can you see the waves of grief and uncertainty, the anxiety and doubts, the low self-esteem, the bulimia, the drug use, the questioning, the dysfunctional relationships, the date rape? The storm is raging and threatening to continue to keep us alienated from the love for and the acceptance of our own bodies. It keeps us from considering how to treat other’s bodies with respect and with integrity, or from considering how to be sexually ethical and responsible. It keeps us distracted from thinking about what the life and ministry of the Human One, this one who became flesh, could teach us about our bodies and our intimate relationships.

Slaying Goliath and Calming the Seas

What does it take to slay a giant? Does it take courage? Absolutely. It takes people who will speak out and say it is “about hearts not body parts.” (5) How did Jesus calm the seas of suffering and pain? The story of incarnation is that he came in order to love, to show us what divine loving might look like in a human being who lived in an age of empire. He went to his death rather than pick up the sword, or submit to the perversion of religious authority, or bow down to any emperor, even one who might threaten him by seeming like Goliath himself. Because that is what a powerful, loving courageous person does. He stepped out into the stormy seas to meet his fearful friends who were abandoned and isolated. Because that is what a powerful loving courageous person does.

Being courageous against this Goliath means you and I must start proclaiming aloud the goodness of the body, each and every part, the goodness of our sensuality, and the goodness of our feelings, the juiciness of being alive. We must proclaim the injustice of misogyny and racial stereotyping. We must proclaim that the violence against women, against sexual minorities, against our body selves must stop. We must proclaim the racial egalitarianism of Jesus’ ministry.

The Genesis story is clear: God made the bodies of human creatures and pronounced them “good.” We must, as Christians, take the lead to proclaim we have nothing to fear from information and so teach our children. We must stop being afraid of our desire for pleasure and our drive for connection and intimacy so that we can talk

about the real moral compass. It is found in our hearts not in our body parts. And when a compassionate heart is unafraid of the body and informed with age-appropriate language, and medically accurate information, and a well-considered sexual ethic, then we will discover blessing and life abundant, and there is nothing to fear.

It is God's sufficiency, God's faithfulness, God's intervention that helps us slay those giants who threaten our well-being and helps us calm those seas of suffering. All that is needed are our hands on the slingshots and our mouth ready to speak to the turbulent waters.

George Bernard Shaw wrote that the true joy in life is to live our lives for the whole community. He said "I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I love.... Life is no brief candle to me; it is a sort of splendid torch which I've got a hold of for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations."

Friends, our culture is afraid of the body and of shared, mutual pleasure. We live in the shadows of repression or self-centered objectification known as hedonism. There are no splendid torches that would provide guidelines for liberating our body selves from our fears and repression. There is only ignorance. There is no inclusive moral compass out there, only a harmful and sharp division between the body and the spirit.

The Bible says to let our lights shine so the world can see our good works. (Matt 5:16) Good works are those that counter all oppression and repression, all body injustice.

We don't need candles. We need torches and the torch light of Christianity is that when God took human form we can lay aside all our fears of the body. It is good, it is very good. So, get out your slingshots. We have to go slay a giant!

(1) "The Purity Myth" by Jessica Valenti

(2) Ibid

(3) "America's War on Sex, The Attack on Law, Lust and Liberty" p 57. by Marty Klein

(4) 3/8/2004 from the Institute on Religion and Democracy

(5) Bishop Gene Robinson of New Hampshire said this at a conference at Pacific School of Religion entitled "Sex and The City of God: Intimacy and Wholeness" in 2005