

Not like the others.

A sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Canady III

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http://lectionarypage.net/YearB_RCL/Pentecost/BProp5_RCL.html

When my sister was in pre-school and I was in high school, we would sometimes hang out and watch movies. There was pretty large collection to choose from, but only a few that were in the regular rotation. Since our mom didn't think a three year old should watch *Star Wars*, I usually let my sister pick. One of her favorites was *The Jungle Book*, Disney's 1967 animated adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's classic tale. And there is one particular song in that movie that we would always sing really loudly. It's the scene where King Louie, the orangutan who was not in Kipling's book, tries in vain to get the secret of making fire from Mowgli, the boy in the story. Since he's a

human, (or a mancub as King Louie calls him), Louis thinks he can share the secret, and then the apes would be as powerful as humans. And he sings this song,

Oh I'm the king of swingers, hoo, the jungle VIP.

I've reached the top and had to stop and that's what's ailing me.

I wanna be man, mancub, and stroll right into town
And be just like the other men. I'm tired of monkeying around.

I wanna be like you. I wanna walk like you.

Talk like you, too. You'll see it's true.

An ape like me can learn to be

A human too.¹

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JDzlhW3XTM>

Of course Mowgli doesn't know how to make fire. He just knows how to be a boy in the same way his new found friends Baloo the bear and Bagheera the panther know how to be a bear and a panther. And neither of them seem to want to be anything else or do anything else except love and nurture Mowgli. But it also marks a turn in the movie where Mowgli realizes he's not like the other characters he is encountering, even the ones who want to help him.

One of the behaviors that I believe breaks the heart of God is the desire to be something or someone we are not. It's not the sin of coveting (you know: The 10th Commandment), wanting what someone else has or is, but it's the belief that who God made us to be is not enough. That we need to look to something or someone else to

fulfill us. It is the very betrayal of our identity as children of God to think that we have to look like someone or something else in order to be fully ourselves.

Just like Mowgli's encounter with King Louie, our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures mark a major turning point in Israel's history with God and indeed in God's dealings with humanity. For many centuries, Israel, God's chosen people, have been led solely by God with God speaking and working through various leaders, often called judges. They encountered plenty of hostile people and were the initiator in several key conflicts along the way.

The did not have an undefeated record in their conflicts. But when they were outnumbered and the smaller force, their faith and trust in their Creator and Redeemer helped them carry the day. Oh, sure, they weren't always faithful to God, and the Bible is full of stories about that. But God was always faithful to them and God always loved them no matter what happened. They finally arrived in a land flowing with milk & honey, called it the Promised Land, and they set up life there. The Judges continued to help settle disputes among the nation and lead the people during times of conflict. And for the most part, it was enough. When the people grumbled to the judge and the then the judge took it to God, God heard their grumblings and either reminded of them all God had done for them, or

helped to fix the situation and make them happy. At one point in Israel's history, a little over 1,000 years before Jesus was born, a man named Samuel rose up as a judge, having been called by God as a small child raised in the Temple. He served as a judge his whole life, Scripture tell us.²

One day during Samuel's leadership, late in his life, the elders of Israel approach Samuel and say, "Appoint for us a king to judge us like all the other nations have." Now this isn't the first time that the Israelites have done such a thing. Several generations before, there was a Judge named Gideon. He led them to some great victories and even negotiated lasting peace during his 40-year rule. The elders of Israel back then said to Gideon, "Set it up so your

² | Samuel 7:15

son and then grandson will rule over us.³” Gideon replies that only God can rule over Israel. That’s the way it has always been because that was their covenant with God. The difference between then and our passage from 1st Samuel is that the people asked Gideon to do this because he had provided leadership and peace and prosperity, and they wanted that to continue. They didn’t ask for Gideon to be a king, because that wasn’t proper. In fact, shortly after Gideon’s death, a guy named Abimelech appoints himself as a king, and it’s three rather miserable years for everyone involved, especially Abimelech. In the 1st Samuel passage we heard today, the elders want a king because they wanted to be like other nations. They looked around and saw the grass on the other side of the fence and thought

³ Judges 8:22

surely it must be greener. **Make us like other nations.**

We have decided we aren't enough as we are, so we want to be like them.

After all the covenants, the rescue from Egypt, the arrival into the Promised Land, the people of Israel did not get it. They weren't like other nations. Their calling, their choosing was different than other peoples on earth. Their God had done for them what no other supposed deity had done for any other people. And they wanted to be ***like other nations?*** Samuel is pretty crushed by this request and God consols him, offering one of the first known "It's not you; it's me" moments. "It's not you they are rejecting," God says, "It's me." God reminds Samuel that they have been doing this since the day they

left Egypt, abandoning God to be run after false gods, only this time, the false god isn't Baal, it's another nation and the belief that they could increase their own value by being distinctly **NOT** the people God created them to be. It's an action that rejects God because it puts national identity above the identity of being created in the image of God. It's the rejection of the idea that God will provide for them, and that acceptance of the idea that they need to protect what they have for fear that someone else will take it or change it or abuse it.

I dearly and honestly wish I could believe that humans have learned enough not to repeat those same mistakes. Not just the rejection of the one true God to chase after false gods, but the sin of thinking that someone

else's gain, someone else's sharing of the pie will mean our loss, especially if that other person speaks a different language or has a different skin color, and I'd like to think that we have learned from the sin of thinking that we can put any other identity over the identity of being one of God's own people. But I don't think we have.

Because, see, as God's people, as followers of Jesus, we are NOT like other people. As followers of Jesus, we are, as the Apostle Peter writes: a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God's own possession.⁴ And while that is a badge of honor, no badge is properly worn without great humility and great responsibility. It is not an honor on which to rest. It is not a moment to strut. It's not a secret handshake to an elite

⁴ 1 Peter 2:9

club. It is never permission to discriminate or abuse or belittle or to be intentionally cruel, especially to the most vulnerable. It's a calling to remember who we are and whose we are. We are not bound by ethnic or national identity. While a piece of who we are, they should never, never, never rank higher than our identity as a child of God and as followers of Jesus. The way of Jesus isn't about the color of our skin or the flag we fly or the man-made borders in which we live, it's about the relationships we help build and create and heal. It's a reminder that if WE can have a place at the table, there is always room for someone else, even if, or maybe especially if, they don't look, think or even believe just like we do. It's about sharing Jesus with those who need to hear it, and

hearing the perspective of Jesus from those who see the world differently than us. Being a royal priesthood and a holy people is about knowing the loving, liberating, live-giving, God who created each of us in the divine image and knowing that no one can ever take that away from us. And it is the responsibility to love all of our neighbors in such a way that they know that created them to be enough, too.

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