

Judges: Be Careful What You Wish Sermon 8-12-18

Judges 11:1-14, 27-40

Now Jephthah the Gileadite, the son of a prostitute, was a mighty warrior. Gilead was the father of Jephthah. ²Gilead's wife also bore him sons; and when his wife's sons grew up, they drove Jephthah away, saying to him, "You shall not inherit anything in our father's house; for you are the son of another woman." ³Then Jephthah fled from his brothers and lived in the land of Tob. Outlaws collected around Jephthah and went raiding with him.

⁴After a time the Ammonites made war against Israel. ⁵And when the Ammonites made war against Israel, the elders of Gilead went to bring Jephthah from the land of Tob. ⁶They said to Jephthah, "Come and be our commander, so that we may fight with the Ammonites." ⁷But Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "Are you not the very ones who rejected me and drove me out of my father's house? So why do you come to me now when you are in trouble?" ⁸The elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "Nevertheless, we have now turned back to you, so that you may go with us and fight with the Ammonites, and become head over us, over all the inhabitants of Gilead." ⁹Jephthah said to the elders of Gilead, "If you bring me home again to fight with the Ammonites, and the LORD gives them over to me, I will be your head." ¹⁰And the elders of Gilead said to Jephthah, "The LORD will be witness between us; we will surely do as you say." ¹¹So Jephthah went with the elders of Gilead, and the people made him head and commander over them; and Jephthah spoke all his words before the LORD at Mizpah.

¹²Then Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites and said, "What is there between you and me, that you have come to me to fight against my land?" ¹³The king of the Ammonites answered the messengers of Jephthah, "Because Israel, on coming from Egypt, took away my land from the Arnon to the Jabbok and to the Jordan; now therefore restore it peaceably." ¹⁴Once again Jephthah sent messengers to the king of the Ammonites ²⁷"It is not I who have sinned against you, but you are the one who does me wrong by making war on me. Let the LORD, who is judge, decide today for the Israelites or for the Ammonites."²⁸But the king of the Ammonites did not heed the message that Jephthah sent him.

²⁹Then the spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah, and he passed through Gilead and Manasseh. He passed on to Mizpah of Gilead, and from Mizpah of Gilead he passed on to the Ammonites. ³⁰And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, "If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, ³¹then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the

Ammonites, shall be the Lord's, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering.”³² So Jephthah crossed over to the Ammonites to fight against them; and the LORD gave them into his hand.³³ He inflicted a massive defeat on them from Aroer to the neighborhood of Minnith, twenty towns, and as far as Abel-keramim. So the Ammonites were subdued before the people of Israel.³⁴ Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah; and there was his daughter coming out to meet him with timbrels and with dancing. She was his only child; he had no son or daughter except her.³⁵ When he saw her, he tore his clothes, and said, “Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I cannot take back my vow.”³⁶ She said to him, “My father, if you have opened your mouth to the LORD, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the LORD has given you vengeance against your enemies, the Ammonites.”³⁷ And she said to her father, “Let this thing be done for me: Grant me two months, so that I may go and wander on the mountains, and bewail my virginity, my companions and I.”³⁸ “Go,” he said and sent her away for two months. So she departed, she and her companions, and bewailed her virginity on the mountains.³⁹ At the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to the vow he had made. She had never slept with a man. So there arose an Israelite custom that⁴⁰ for four days every year the daughters of Israel would go out to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

Message:

To start today, I'm going to share with you an Indian fable. “Once there was a fairly busy family in old India which earned enough so that they would not be hungry and had their pride intact. The head of the family, once while returning from work discovered a rather strange object resembling a monkey's paw in the hands of a fakir (kind of wizard). He asked about it and came to know that it could be used to grant any three wishes of anyone. He had a good laugh about it, but took it home with him as the fakir gave it to him for free. The next day, while his young son was getting ready for his daily job at the mill, he observed the paw and inquired his father about it. Upon knowing about its powers, he urged his father to try it once. Obligated, the father asked the paw for 500 rupees in order to buy a new bicycle. Nothing happened, and the son left for work thinking it was all a sham. But that evening, instead of the son, his boss had come to the house with an envelope in his hands and a look of grief on his face. He informed the boy's mother that the boy had met with an accident and died on the spot. The mother, instantly went into shock and the boy's father in one hand held his mother and from the other took a check from the company. The amount on the check: 500 rupees.

After the boy's cremation, when the couple were in utter sorrow, the father told his wife all about the paw as he could not hold it in any longer. His wife, full of rage grabbed the paw and instantly asked for her son's life. As soon as she wished, there was a knock on the door and the mother went happily to open the door. In those 30 seconds, the father understood the game that destiny was playing and he knew that his son would return just the way he was gone. As he had seen his dead body for the identification process, he could not bear the thought of his wife seeing her son half burnt and covered in blood. She would break to the core and the damages would be irreparable. So he made his last and final wish before she reached the door. The sound of the door knocking stopped. When the door was opened, nothing but the sound of wind and the touch of rain could be witnessed.” While a tragic fable, it teaches us something, what we wish for may not be what we had in mind. Or have you ever thought that if you just had this thing, this possession, this different job, this promotion, that it would make life all the better? So you made promises and vows and you attained your hearts desire. Was it as great as you expected it to be on the other side of the accomplishment? Maybe. Maybe not.

In our passage, it's similar to both the fable and to the story of Abimelech, but similar in different ways. In the story of Jephthah, he's similar to Abimelech in that he is an illegitimate child. He is the son of a prostitute. His father is Gilead. Who is Gilead? This is slightly confusing. Gilead is, first of all, a region to the east of the Jordan river. So for the sake of reference, Jericho and Jerusalem are on the west side of the Jordan river. Jericho and Jerusalem are technically in the “promise land” while Gilead is not. Gilead was still given to the Israelites though as they conquer land leading up to conquering the promise land. Back in the book of Joshua, when Joshua divides the land up between the many tribes of Israel, he gives Gilead to the Gadites, the Reubenites and the half-tribe of Manasseh. That might not mean much to you, but they later, in our passage, are known as Gileadites. Gilead in our story is also a person. He's the father of Jephthah. So our text is both referring to the region and to the person, Gilead. After Abimelech, two minor judges rule for a combined 55 years. And then what did the Israelites do? You should know this by now. In chapter 10, verse 6, “The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord...” The text goes on to indicate that they worshipped other gods again. And how did the Israelites respond. You should know this too. In 10:10, “So the Israelites cried to the Lord...” They complained, again. And actually, at first, God refuses to deliver them and in spite tells them to complain to the gods they worship. His mercy has run out. You begin to see God's apathy for these people and it continues in our passage. Of course, there's not a sign of repentance, but they commit to stop worshipping other gods. They stop the behavior, but they're not really sorry. So God reluctantly agrees to help

them. And by this time, the Israelites are enslaved in Gilead. So back to our passage, after we hear Jephthah is an illegitimate child and similar to Abimelech, we see that his brothers disown him and sends him away. Saying to him, “You shall not inherit anything in our father’s house; for you are the son of another woman.” And he flees to Tob, southeast of the Sea of Galilee. So he doesn’t kill his brothers, like Abimelech, but he flees.

Unlike Abimelech, Jephthah is found, sought out, by the elders of Gilead for the purpose of saving the Israelites from the Ammonites. They want him to command their armies. He must be a great commander. His response, “Are you not the very ones who rejected me and drove me out of my father’s house? So why do you come to me now when you are in trouble?” So to sweeten the deal, they offer him to be the “head” or leader of Israel if he defeats the Ammonites. A pretty sweet deal for Jephthah if he wins. He’s got a lot riding on this. So they make that promise to each other and invoke the Lord as their witness. So if this is God’s will, it will be. They’re asking for the Lord’s blessing after the fact. Jephthah tries to peacefully negotiate with the Ammonites to end this war, but he has no such luck. He invokes the Lord again, that if this is of Him, the Israelites will win this battle. “²⁹Then the spirit of the LORD came upon Jephthah...” You may be familiar with that phrase by now, we’ve heard it in about every instance of the Judges. And then, here is where it gets interesting. If being sought out to lead the Israelites in battle and the “spirit of the Lord” coming upon Jephthah wasn’t enough confirmation that this was the Lord’s calling, making a vow should do the trick, right? That should ensure victory. That will reassure Jephthah. “³⁰And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, ‘If you will give the Ammonites into my hand, ³¹then whoever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord’s, to be offered up by me as a burnt offering.’” Now, I’m sure he’s thinking that it will be a goat or a dog or something. After massively defeating the Ammonites he went home and this is what happened. “³⁴Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah; and there was his daughter coming out to meet him with timbrels and with dancing. She was his only child; he had no son or daughter except her. ³⁵When he saw her, he tore his clothes, and said, ‘Alas, my daughter! You have brought me very low; you have become the cause of great trouble to me. For I have opened my mouth to the LORD, and I cannot take back my vow.’ ³⁶She said to him, ‘My father, if you have opened your mouth to the LORD, do to me according to what has gone out of your mouth, now that the LORD has given you vengeance against your enemies, the Ammonites.’” So the foolish vow of Jephthah comes back to bite him in the butt. What he wished for, came true, but not in the way he imagined.

There are many interesting things about this vow. One, the Israelites didn’t practice human sacrifice. If you think about it, even when Abraham was tested to

sacrifice his son, Isaac, an angel stopped him. Human sacrifice is actually a practice of worshipping other gods. The very practices God hates, is the practice that proves these people have not actually turned away from worshipping other gods as they promised before bringing Jephthah on the scene. They manipulated and lied to God to be saved. And Jephthah's tragedy illustrates this very point. In so many words, God is saying, "Stop giving me lip service. Stop tell me what I want to hear and start changing your behavior." Two, what does this vow say about Jephthah? The spirit of the Lord is upon him and all the momentum is going his way towards victory. But in Jephthah's insecurity, he tries to corner God with this vow to ensure victory. A sly move. Or so he thought. While the spirit of the Lord is upon Jephthah, he actually illicit a lack of trust in God with this vow. How often have we had God on our side and we try to corner God to do what we want Him to do for us? For our personal advancement? The last thing that's interesting about this vow is, who holds Jephthah to this vow? If you take a close look at the text, it's not God. Jephthah holds himself to this vow. Or at the very least, his daughter does. As a skillful negotiator who convinced the elders of Gilead to make him leader over them and one who tried to negotiate peace with the Ammonites, why couldn't he re-negotiate with God about his daughter? Why couldn't he work out another arrangement? And why didn't God intervene as He did with Abraham and Isaac?

It may be the same questions we ask in the midst of tragedies today. Why didn't God protect us? Why didn't God intervene? Where is God in all this? In some situations, not all, I believe God lets us suffer. Now, you might think that to be cruel. And I can understand your argument. But after warning a teenager to not do something wrong, what do they do? You may warn them a million times. But sometimes they don't understand until they experience consequences of bad decisions. My mother warned me for years about keeping good finances. I never wanted to listen. I wanted to live freely. I wanted to have fun. I didn't want to think about it. It wasn't until I felt the pain of delaying certain dreams, because I couldn't afford them with all the debt I accrued, that I needed to change my ways. It wasn't until I witnessed the pain I was about cause my future wife, that I knew I needed to change my behavior. Was it cruel for God to let me make those mistakes? Maybe. It's certainly a dangerous game. Why didn't God send me the money to care for the debt? Because then I wouldn't learn anything. Sometimes we don't understand the ramifications and consequences of our decisions until we suffer those consequences. God tries, time after time, as we see throughout Judges to protect the Israelite people by warning them not to worship other gods. And they continue to do so and get themselves into slavery. He has mercy, as displayed in this story and previous stories. We might think His rules are trite and antiquated, but the rules are there because out of love for us, He wants to protect

us. When we break these rules its not that we are hurting God's feelings. He's not that fragile. It's that we're hurting ourselves. And as any parent, it's painful to witness you children hurting themselves. But there comes a point, where, as a parent, your words no longer carry any weight. And as a last resort, you allow your children to suffer the consequences of their decisions. We get this sense in our passage that God is distant. He's involved in the story. The "spirit of the Lord" comes upon Jephthah, but it appears God is distant or apathetic. He's not involved to the same degree as He was before. So why does God let Jephthah go through with this sacrifice? I think God is apathetic to stopping the Israelites from performing practices of worshipping other gods. He's tried to tell them over and over again. But they didn't listen. This is another example of the disintegration, the downward spiral, of Israel.

So what is the Lord trying to tell us today? Well...for one, don't try to impose your will upon God. Don't try to impose your will upon God. Now, you might think that's a pretty simple ask. And to some degree it is. But what happens when you get anxious and fearful? What happens when you feel totally out of control? What happens when you feel like your world is falling apart? When we get anxious and fearful, it's tempting to take things into our own hands. How often has Providence tried to do what they wanted to do because we all grew impatient in waiting on the Lord? We said in so many words, "We're going to do what we want to do. I hope this is what you want God." We saw another church do this awesome program and we thought, "Yeah...let's do that." And so we tried to do the same here and it failed, but we didn't ask, "Lord, is this what you want?" In our impatience and anxiousness, we tend to impose our will upon God, as if we could, just as Jephthah did in making a foolish vow. I've even seen this on the denominational level. We have taken the "spirit of the Lord" out of Annual Conference and out of our structure. We've done a great job at building the organization known as Church of the Brethren. There is policies and procedures to everything. We ask moderators to lead us at Annual Conference, but they're not allowed to change anything without the delegate body voting to change anything at Annual Conference. How then can they lead? Some of you may know that the Church of the Brethren has started this "Compelling Vision" process trying to come up with a new direction for the denomination. We began conversation at Annual Conference about this "Compelling Vision" at our tables. And it saddened me that the conversations I had were around things like peace, love and service. Notice what I didn't hear. I didn't hear things like, Christ is our center. I didn't hear things like, the salvation of Jesus. While a central belief of the Brethren is about how we practice our faith, we've idolized the practice and lost the foundation of our faith. We've become so accustomed to doing group think and coming up with all the ways that we can better organize and structure things, but

we've failed terribly, as of late, to ask the one whom we need to consult first. Instead of relying on our limited human knowledge, why don't we rely on the one who knows all? Why aren't we asking God, "what do you want?" We want new direction absent of listening to God. Instead, we want to tell God what to do because we are anxious and impatient. And the tragedy is, we are the ones who will suffer the consequences.

Another lesson to be learned from this story is: are we teachable? When an employer hires a new employee, one of the biggest things they want to know is not just, "can they do the job?" or "do they have the knowledge for the job?" The question is, "Are they teachable? Are they willing to learn and grow?" Many of you are in the last third of your life and you may think you know it all. But the mark of a faithful follower of Jesus is one who is still teachable. If you don't want your faith to go stale, are you willing to learn and grow? Jephthah made a terrible mistake with his vow and his daughter. Is this going to send him into a terrible spiral, or will he learn and grow from his mistakes? As we see in the passage after ours, Jephthah gets in a squabble with the Ephraimites and he kills forty-two thousand of them. That's not a sign of a man who has learned from his mistakes. God let's us suffer the consequences of some of our poor decisions. Are you going to let that send you into a space of despair and "woe is me?" Or are you going to heed God's voice and lesson and grow in your faith in Him?

If we turn to the gospels, we see Jesus interact with a young man who wants to inherit eternal life. He has done all that the commandments ask of him. He has not murdered. He has not committed adultery. He has not stolen. He has not born false witness. He has honored his father and mother. He has even loved his neighbor. But then Jesus said, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." This guy still has room to grow. Now, this isn't a general how-to statement to all believers about what to do with wealth. What Jesus is doing here is pin-pointing this young man's growth opportunity. He still has room for growth. And he leaves the scene grieving because he can't mature in this way. Out of the failures in your life, where is God pushing you to grow? We all hate pain and struggle, but out of that struggle how is God calling you to greater faith and greater intimacy with Him?

Again, this is why we need Jesus. We can try to do things on our own. In our fear and anxiousness, we can react quickly and do what we want to do, but that will ultimately hurt us. Now, I'm not saying that every minuscule action, like brushing your teeth, needs to be consulted with God. What I am saying is that we need to orient our lives toward Him. Jephthah's posture was oriented to himself, other gods and somewhat to the Lord. Three masters don't work so well. The more we begin to mirror Jesus by spending time with Jesus, the more we will be in

line with the Father's will. This is isn't about particulars. This is about posture and submission. When we understand our relationship rightly to God, we will be less likely to self-inflict wounds just as Jephthah did. Providence, God is calling us all to higher level of faith in this season. He is calling us to avoid reacting out of our anxiety and fear. He is encouraging us to submit to His will rather than our own ideas. You may not recognize it now, but God is doing an awesome and mighty thing in us. In the waiting, in the intimacy we are developing with the Lord, God is growing something inside of us. He is leading us to new life. He is leading us to re-birth in Christ. So that God can be the one who is glorified. "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." 2 Corinthians 4:6-7. May Christ's light shine through us as we face Him and allow Him to lead us. Amen.