

Faithfully Imperfect

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Preaching on: 1
Samuel 3:1–20

You know, it's funny because I've heard this scripture reading so many times in my life. And, of course, I've always identified with Samuel. Samuel, the young up-and-comer who speaks with God. Samuel, the golden child, who has his whole life ahead him. Samuel, the chosen one, destined to become a great prophet and leader of his people.

Do you remember when you were young and everyone simply admired all your potential, rather than anything you had actually accomplished yet? That wasn't so bad! I remember that feeling so well. I remember feeling intoxicated by the possibilities! "Oh, the Places You'll Go!" as Dr. Seuss put it.

I've always identified with Samuel. But I can't keep identifying with this child or this young man forever, can I? At some point I have to face reality here. My whole life isn't ahead of me anymore. I'm somewhere in the middle of things. I'm not all pure potential anymore. I've actually had to *do* stuff—I've had to make choices, sometimes tough choices. I've come to forks in the road and had to commit myself to the left or the right and leave the other way behind. I've had successes. But I've also had failures. People don't admire me for what I might accomplish anymore, they sum me up by my successes and my failures.

Yes, I've had failures, and disappointments, and realized (slowly, painfully) that I might not be as perfect as I once thought I would be. It turns out that perfection is just that state, unique to youth, before you've actually had the opportunity to mess anything up yet. So, as I cross more deeply into midlife, I realize I now have more in common with Eli than I do with Samuel. Eli, with his faults and his foibles and failures. Eli who is getting older, and heavier, and weaker. Eli who had the best of intentions, who always wanted to do the right thing, but who hasn't always succeeded. Eli, who has now learned of his ultimate fate: After all his service, all the good he has done, he will be judged by his failures rather than by his successes. His end and the end of his line is assured. This wasn't the dream he had for himself when he was Samuel's age.

We're getting more and more used to the downfall of powerful and famous men in our culture. Especially since the Me-Too era, each shocking new revelation of personal depravity becomes less and less shocking to us. But, of course, Eli isn't guilty of anything like that. He is at core a good person who has tried his best. The crimes he is being judged for aren't even his—they're his sons'.

But today when famous leaders are called out for bad behavior, what's the next step? They deny it. They fight it. They attack the accusing party, attack the media, attack their political opponents. Not Eli. Eli, who was a fundamentally good man, accepts his fate. "It is the Lord," he says, "let him do what seems good to him." I find that incredibly admirable—that willingness, that ability to accept a judgment that must feel like a bitter disappointment, that must feel completely unfair. But Eli accepts his fate. He accepts reality.

I heard this wonderful story recently about a friend of a friend. Let's call her Sarah. And Sarah was in my phase of life—middle-age. And life hadn't gone the way she thought it was going to go. She had

dedicated her whole life to serving the most vulnerable people in our society—people living on the streets without shelter. And it's hard work. And she had breast cancer. And she'd just had a double mastectomy. And she's alone without a partner of any kind. And she's just burned out at the bitter disappointment that life has turned out to be.

And so she goes on a trip to Italy. And at her first stop in Sicily she basically accidentally (because she's not religious) finds herself in a little grotto underneath an old, ruined stone church. And there's a man down in there—an artist—making angels' wings. And he tells her that this is what he does all day: he sits under the church crafting these angels' wings and thinking about the meaning of life. And so she asks him, "Oh really? What is it? What's the meaning of life?"

And in the conversation that ensues she ends up telling this total stranger (who is not the kind of person she would normally trust or open up to) the whole bitter story of her life and her suffering. And when she finishes, this big, burly Sicilian man, wraps her up suddenly in a bear hug, squeezing her chest to his chest. And she's immediately terrified and uncomfortable, but then she just let's go and she starts weeping in his arms.

And when she's done, she tries to sort of tap out of the hug. But this guy doesn't let go, he keeps squeezing her! And something releases in her body, and she breaks down again, but this time she's not weeping she's sobbing. And when it passes, she tries to break away. But he still won't let go. He's squeezing her and saying, "It's OK, Sarah. It's OK. Life is beautiful! Life is beautiful!" And she breaks down a third time, not just crying but convulsing uncontrollably with grief and mourning. And then he lets her go.

And he tells her he's a priest and he takes care of this ruined old church. Why? Well, he takes her down into the catacombs underneath the church where the bones of all the old priests—some going back to pre-Christian times are piled up in the dark. And Sarah realizes she has to run, she needs to catch a train to her next destination. And so she runs out there, and then the rest of her trip through Italy is the most amazing, Spirit-filled adventure of her life. Sarah's ears are tingling and around every corner there is some person or activity or coincidence that makes it feel like after a long, long silence God is speaking directly to her.

What happened? What changed? I think Sarah stopped fighting it. She accepted it—her life, her suffering. She accepted it for what it was. She went down and saw all the old bones of her life piled up in the underworld—the flaws, the failures, the mistakes, the missed opportunities, the disappointments, the losses, the dreams that never materialized, and she accepted them for what they were. Acceptance is the greatest form of release. I think it's when we refuse to accept the ghosts of our past that they haunt us and refuse to leave us alone. But when we visit them, accept them, and take care of them, we're able to move on. "It is the Lord," Eli says, "let him do what seems good to him." This is not a passive statement. To get to those words, Eli had to do the work of total, radical acceptance of himself—the good and the bad.

And Eli, like Sarah, doesn't give up. Eli doesn't say, "Well, if that's the way you're going to be, I'm just going to go home and wait for death." He continues to do his job to the best of his ability until the terrible day of the death of his sons in battle and his own death on hearing the news. He continues to mentor Samuel. He continues to give himself to his people and to God. While Eli is one of the most extreme examples of this we can think of, it seems like an important point for understanding how to live life after we've accepted we're not perfect and that life isn't fair. If you give up, you lose. And the rest of us lose because we lose your experience and your perspective. Perfect people make terrible mentors. Terrible. Perfect people can only mentor perfect people. The rest of us need a screwup—someone who can teach us how to be faithful through disappointment. Which is Eli's superpower here.

When I think of Eli, I think of former president Jimmy Carter who famously transitioned from a one-term presidency into one of the most impactful post-presidential careers in American history. Jimmy Carter, like Eli, faced significant challenges and some might say failures, during his time in office—from economic troubles to political strife, like the Iran hostage crisis—that led to a loss in his bid for re-election. Yet, he did not fade away or give in to bitterness. Instead, he emerged as an elder statesman deeply committed to promoting peace, health, and human rights across the globe. He is hands down the most admired living former president, and he's admired now on both the left and the right. Because he has managed to transcend the political divide, which is a very difficult thing to do in America today.

We see here a reflection of Eli's ethos: a life well-lived is not marked by uninterrupted success but by the willingness to stand by one's principles, to continue contributing positively to the community, and to teach others through one's own experiences of imperfection and resilience. I think there's a word for this: wisdom.

Wisdom is what comes on the other side of failure and disappointment. A perfect person will always be a young fool. But the rest of us have a shot at the true greatness of a wisdom that will be valued by our whole community. And this is Eli's greatest gift to his people in the end. It is Eli, flawed though he may be, not Samuel, who knows how to listen for God. It is Eli, through failure, through acceptance, and through commitment who knows how to really hear what God is saying. And without Eli to teach him how, Samuel would have never heard God's call.

Wherever we are on life's long journey, let's not be afraid to identify with Eli. He is a good mentor for those of us who know what it's like to experience the full spectrum of life's trials and triumphs. Life is not a race to perfection but a pilgrimage through the underworld of our old bones. Remember Eli's wisdom and you might find that your greatest legacy lies in the wisdom you pass on, the lives you touch, and the quiet, indomitable spirit that refuses to give up, teaching us all how to be faithfully imperfect.