

First Mennonite Church of Champaign-Urbana

SEEDS OF PEACE

1 Samuel 25

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Abigail is one amazing woman, don't you think? The capable and wise mistress of a substantial household, trusted by the servants. A brave woman of action. A skillful diplomat who employs words to good advantage. A righteous person who knows God's ways and who speaks with a prophetic voice. A peacemaker.

In this engaging story, Abigail and her foolish husband Nabal represent a mismatched pair of opposites, while Abigail and the future king David comprise a complementary, attractive couple. The triangle is resolved through the death of Nabal and the marriage of Abigail and David. This is the stuff of fairy tales and romances – *except* that there is another actor guiding the story, namely GOD. God ordains that David wins Abigail, and eventually the throne, *not* by slaying his adversary in fairy-tale hero fashion, but rather through the eloquent, non-violent peacemaking orchestrated by the heroine.

As we delve deeper into the story, I want you to be thinking about how we might appropriate this text for our present-day situation. How do we see ourselves functioning to advance God's agenda in tension-filled situations where vulnerable people on the margin are provoked by the privileged? Are we passive bystanders? Or are we like the shepherd who alerts Abigail to the problem? Or are we like Abigail, who brings a peace offering and a humble apology to those smarting from the foolish behavior of a wealthy superpower?

Let's recall the larger narrative to which 1 Samuel 25 belongs. Saul is king; however, David has already been anointed as his successor. God sent the prophet Samuel to Bethlehem to the house of Jesse and told him to anoint Jesse's youngest son, David, when he was but a shepherd boy. Before long, David finds himself in the court of King Saul, where his harp playing soothes the king's troubled spirit.

As David grows in favor and maturity – on an ascending path toward the day when he will become king, Saul moves in the opposite direction – falling away from the Lord's favor, under a dark cloud, aware that his power and influence are waning and that David is the rival who will displace him.

To save his life, David is forced to flee and hide out in the wilderness. In the wilderness, a large band of men joins up with him. In chapter 22, we read, "Everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented gathered to him; and he became captain over them. Those who were with him numbered about four hundred." By chapter 25, the number has grown to six hundred men. The harsh economic and political realities that have brought them together must be noted. These are men without means or influence or power. It's no small matter to provision them and to keep

them from taking the law into their own hands. I imagine David's leadership skills are getting a workout! No wonder David seizes the festive occasion of the sheep shearing to send greetings of *shalom* to Nabal and petition him for a hospitable sharing of the feast.

Nabal responds to the three-fold shalom greeting—Peace be to you, and peace be to your house and peace be to all that you have—in a suspicious and selfish manner. He doesn't ask his shepherds to verify David's story of goodwill and protection for Nabal's flocks. He doesn't honor the code of hospitality that requires a generous response to strangers. This representative of the elite, when confronted with the plight of the marginalized, summarily dismisses and insults them. The have-nots are not going to share in his hard-earned wealth! The seeds of peace cannot penetrate Nabal's unyielding soil. The blessing of shalom is refused.

As a result, economic issues become intertwined with issues of honor and pride. Arrogance and wealth have corrupted Nabal and undermined his responsibility to the commonweal as mandated by God's Word. Now both collective economic need and offense weigh heavily upon David. In the passion of the moment, he responds to the news of Nabal's insult with the war cry, "Every man strap on his sword!"

While King Saul remains alive, David is being tested – tested for worthiness to serve as Israel's king. A significant part of this testing has to do with the temptation to shed blood, to take revenge. The temptation presented by Nabal's refusal follows immediately on another close call.

Just a few verses earlier, in chapter 24, we have a dramatic episode where Saul pursues David in order to kill him. Saul visits a cave, not realizing that David and men are hiding there. In the cave, David sneaks up on Saul and has the opportunity to kill his pursuer, yet he refrains from doing so. Instead, David cuts off a piece of Saul's cloak to demonstrate that the opportunity was his and that he held back. David knows his time will come and that he is to wait on the Lord. "God may avenge me, but it is in his hands." "God is our judge."

With Nabal, however, passion propels David forward toward an act of violence that, had it been acted out, would have had dire consequences and thwarted his capacity eventually to rule over a unified kingdom. Enter Abigail, the mediating agent, who projects God's voice, alleviates need, soothes offense, and staves off violence.

How does Abigail the peacemaker proceed? First, she listens attentively to the witness of the shepherd and accepts the hard truth that her husband is an utter fool. The Hebrew name Nabal means "foolish" or "senseless." "[A]s an adjective the word is used especially of persons who have no perception of ethical or religious claims" (NET Bible note). Isaiah 32:6 offers a portrait of a "nabal" whose ungodly behavior leaves the hungry unsatisfied and deprives the thirsty of drink.

Having heard the news and discerned the dilemma, the wise woman Abigail acts quickly to show hospitality to David and his men by sending them generous gifts of food and

drink. Verse 18 describes these gifts in detail: 200 loaves, two skins of wine, five dressed sheep, five measures of grain, 100 clusters of raisins, and 200 cakes of figs. She sends this lavish peace offering to David with her young men – a proper response to the greeting of shalom David had earlier sent with his young men.

But Abigail doesn't sit home while her aid package is delivered. She recognizes that economic well-being is not the only matter at stake. The insult must also be addressed.

So picture Abigail, riding out on a donkey to meet David and the hundreds of armed men who accompany him. It's a high-stakes, risky moment. In her wisdom, Abigail chooses a deferential posture. Bowing down before David, she apologizes for her husband and takes upon herself the guilt that rightfully belongs to Nabal. This accomplished and powerful woman scatters seeds of peace with her references to "my lord" and "your servant" and "please forgive."

David has vowed vengeance on all the males of Nabal's household. Now here is a woman assuming responsibility and asking for forgiveness. This is one of those surprising acts of non-violence that deflates the tension and opens up reflective space. David hears the prophetic voice of God speaking through Abigail, warning him against "bloodguilt" and "taking vengeance with your own hand." David will be free of grief and guilt if he hands the outcome over to the Lord. If he remembers the Torah -- "Vengeance is mine," says the Lord (Deut. 32:35).

And so it is. When Nabal dies, David is innocent. Another day we will grapple with the concept of God's vengeance. What we see clearly in 1 Samuel 25 is the notion of shalom justice being carried out. Nabal is convicted when he learns what has taken place; the life goes out of him—symbolically, his flesh turns to stone.

More seeds of peace are scattered in the words shared by David and Abigail. David sends Abigail back home with the blessing, "Go up to your house in peace" (25:35). Abigail agrees to the proposal of marriage from David by saying, "Your servant is ready to wash the feet of the servants of my lord" (25:41).

God intends for people to live non-violently and generously with one another. God intends for everyone to be enclosed in the circle of shalom. This includes our enemies, as Jesus taught us.

Hear how the apostle Paul draws this together in his letter to the church in Rome (Romans 12:19-21):

¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." ²⁰ No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Abigail brings food and drink to the enemy and befriends the enemy. She “gets in the way” of violence, to use the motto of Christian Peacemaker Teams. Like a CPTer, she models a humble courage fueled by her faith. She holds together humility, trust in God, and active, non-violent intervention.

Our current global situation is marked by great extremes between the poor and the rich, the disenfranchised and those in power. The speaking into this context ranges, on the one hand, from bluster, insult, and fear mongering to calls for apologies and redress.

As hopeful evidence, we can point to recent apologies by Western governments for systematic, shalom-breaking activities vis-à-vis First Nation peoples. I refer you to the landmark February 13, 2008 apology to Australia’s indigenous peoples by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd. Last month, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper made a public apology for the forcible removal of First Nation children and the misguided assimilation policies of the state schools they were required to attend for most of the 20th century. In Canada, churches played a major role in pressing for the apology and the truth and reconciliation commission that will soon begin its work.

Lisa Schirch, professor of peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University, points out: “Using military power to suppress groups in Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan is like taking a hammer to a beehive. Even General Petraeus says, ‘there is no military solution in Iraq; the solution is economic and political.’” Lisa describes the great imbalance in federal budgetary allocations between the military and the non-violent tools of diplomacy and development: “While 60 percent of the discretionary budget goes to the military (not even counting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which are in a separate budget), only 3 – 4 percent goes to diplomacy and less than 1 percent is spent on development assistance in foreign aid. More people play in Army bands than serve in the U.S. Foreign Service.” (*Dove Tales*, Peace & Justice Support Network, MCUSA, undated issue mailed June ‘08)

The biblical story of Abigail illustrates how development aid and diplomacy can work as a first response to avert violence. At a time of great danger for increased violence in the Middle East, our church is calling for talk – dialogue that will be seeds of peace. You have in your worship bulletins the text of the resolution on Iran passed at last week’s Central District convention. I urge you to take it home with you and to act upon it.

And in this week’s mail, came a plea from our friends at Christian Peacemaker Teams: “We need more CPTers to carry out the work. Do you know any one who might be called to it?” Beside her signature, co-director Carol Rose penned these words from Matthew 9: “The harvest is great. The laborers are few. Pray the Lord of the harvest.”

The good soil of FMC is soil where the seeds of peace take root and grow tall and strong. As a peace church, we embrace the biblical witness to love our enemies and lay down our lives, rather than resort to violence. Scattering the seeds of peace is also our calling. Like Abigail, when the hour comes, we are called to saddle up and ride out, armed with God’s gospel of peace.