

Sitting on Sin

Joshua 7: 10-21

**First Presbyterian Church
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The walls of Jericho had fallen. Without a battering ram or a flaming arrow. The spiritual encircling of the LORD's people doing the LORD's will squeezed the Jericho walls unto breaking. Seven times on the seventh day, the people marched round the city with trumpets blowing, but saying not a word. When the finally circle had been made, the trumpets blew one more time, and at Joshua's commands the hitherto silent warriors let out a great and mighty shout. The walls of the city fell down flat. God's people entered the city in total triumph.

Next came the devotion of the city to the LORD. The full term was "devotion to destruction." This meant that Israel was the sword in the hand of the God who was enacting his promised judgment against a wicked and unrepentant people. Our modern sensibilities get the creeps here. Did God really want his people to destroy "men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword"? (Josh 6: 23). Did he just let loose the blood lust of his warriors? The images from massacres of whole villages during modern warfare haunt us. Atrocities against children and animals seem unnecessary. This is too much like a jihad for those who follow the God who is love.

Now we are prone, like every age, to consider that our ideas of rights are the ultimate ones. We figure that our sense of what is proper must be the noblest. We reason that we know enough to judge God's plan of redemption as too violent to be just or loving. Of course these accounts are disturbing. But God is working on a plan higher, deeper, more complex and all-reaching that we can yet discern. Let's just note six principles here:

- 1) The sinful world cried out for the **justice** of God. The entire human race had already earned the destruction of the Flood, and not one was righteous in the day of Joshua.
- 2) God's redeeming plans for his world required a people **set apart** in order to be a light for others. This necessarily meant a carving out of a place for them.
- 3) The Canaanites were, among a world of sinful people, particularly evil, licentious and violent. They were a **corrupting influence**, bent on hindering the plan and will of true God.

4) The devotion to destruction was not practiced everywhere that Israel conquered and Israel was not allowed to conquer everywhere. Their warfare was **strictly limited** to securing a particular land to which they were returning after centuries in Egypt.

5) The destruction of Jericho was a **type, a sign**, pointing to the reality that ultimately God will indeed enact his just judgments upon a rebellious world.

6) The fact that Rahab and her family were spared indicates that our God is ever open to pouring his grace even upon his enemies. **Those who ask for mercy receive it.**

Now we can talk more about Israel and the taking of the land some other time. Today, we want to zero in on the story from Joshua 7 of how one man decided he did not like this plan of devoting the entire city to the LORD. He wanted some of the plunder for himself. His name was Achan, and watching all that silver and gold get carted away into Israel's treasury made him covetous. He looked at the beautiful spoils, especially a cloak, and he took them. Achan stole from the LORD what amounted to about five pounds of silver, a pound and a half of gold, and a coat. These he buried in the ground under his tent. He had them, but never got to see them. He just sat on what he had stolen.

I remember the last day of school before Christmas break. I was in kindergarten. We had a class gift exchange. I had gone with my Mom to Mrs. Rae's toy store and we had picked out a really great gift, probably some kind of army set. The kind of Christmas present any boy would have been glad to get. But the package that I received at the exchange was totally lame. I couldn't even tell you now what I got, but it was in the neighborhood of a 25 cent gift, maybe little metal jax with a tiny rubber ball. I was sitting there looking at all the great toys the other kids were opening when a voice next to me said, "Don't like what you got, huh?"

"No," I replied. "It stinks."

"Yeah, mine too." It was David Madlone, one of my pals. He had a suggestion. "Hey, why don't you do what I did?"

"What's that?"

"Take some stuff. Make it right. See, I just put some stuff from the toy box in my bag. It's only fair."

"Yeah, you're right," I said. So when no one was looking I took a few things from the toy area of our class. It was only fair when I'd gotten such a pathetic gift. Later that day at home, my Mom asked me what I had gotten in the gift exchange.

“Oh, lots of stuff! Look at all these great toys someone gave me.” I brought out the things I had stolen. They didn’t look all that great to me. In fact, what I took seemed even lamer than the actual present I was given. I didn’t want this stuff, and I felt sick about it. It didn’t take long for the story to unravel, and we were back at our classroom before the teachers had even finished cleaning up for the Christmas break. My mom had me apologize and give it all back. It was terribly humiliating. But so freeing. I didn’t want that stuff. It had already been working on me. If I had kept it hidden in my bag the whole break, it would have ruined me. I was sitting on sin and the only place that leads is death.

For Achan, the consequences were much worse. The Hebrew army went out to take another city. The victory at Jericho had been so successful, that the captains reasoned they only needed to send out 3000 soldiers. Reputation would do the rest. But something happened. The warriors of Ai did not quail before Israel’s fighting men. They rose up and came at them. Israel grew strangely terrified and the Hebrew warriors began to run away. Thirty six of them were killed. Joshua was distraught. Here they were in the Land, unable to go back across the Jordan, and suddenly it seemed this wasn’t going to be so easy. Joshua cried out to the LORD, “Have you brought us here only to destroy us? When the other people of the land learned that we turned tail and ran, they will rise up, surround us and obliterate your people.” Joshua figured that this was the moment when God stopped acting like God toward his people.

But the LORD replied, in effect, “Get up! I haven’t forsaken you. But Israel has sinned. Someone has stolen for himself some of the devoted things. I will not go before you into battle until you destroy this stolen plunder from among you. Consecrate yourselves anew to me.” One man was ruining it for everyone. We all remember running extra laps because one guy acted out. We remember a whole class being punished because one guy put an eraser on the door hinge so it fell on the teacher when she came back into the room. Until he confessed, we all had to sit there. The community was responsible for the sin of the one man. The sin of the one man had an effect on the whole community.

Finally, after Joshua confronted him directly, Achan confessed. Joshua said to him, “Why did you bring trouble on us? The LORD brings trouble on you today.” Achan, his family, his livestock and his possessions were destroyed that hour.

That’s harsh! I always figure that most of my sins are harming no one but me. Or at most the one person against whom my anger was directed. But this

story is telling us that the whole community of God's people is interconnected. What we do to each other, or neglect to do for one another, affects all of us. This works positively as well as negatively. We depend on each other more than we ever know.

Imagine if we could take that deeper. So that every single person realized, "If I don't sing, the worship is not as powerful. Even if I only mouth the words, or hum a bit, I can make us all stronger." Imagine if every single one of us realized, "My gifts *do* matter. I can't let others carry the weight. I want in on this." Imagine if every week, we each and all remembered and rehearsed, "It matters that I come. Others are strengthened by my presence, even if I never say a word. It matters that I come early to talk to people. It matters that I don't rush away. It matters that I take time to strengthen the ties of the body." Imagine if we looked at our city and realized, "If we don't work on this, no one will. We can't just hunker down with affluence. We've got to launch further into our streets." Think of the energy in worship and the pulsing of creative mission that would pour forth.

These dynamics play out in the way we live our personal lives as well. That's why I love to celebrate 50 year marriages. These commitments are like mighty oaks under whose branches we all shelter. People doing the right thing in business, in relationships, in parenting, in practice are helping hold not only the church but the community together. Every decision for integrity helps the whole city. Every decision to destroy the pagan trinkets that seem so shiny grows us all. Throughout my life this has meant striving for fidelity in finances and marriage, honesty in dealing with elders and governments. Paying the bills. Keeping up the yard. It has also meant little things, like getting rid of a stack of Black Sabbath records as a teenager, or learning to be mindful of how much I talk, or drink, at a party. Or being aware of what shows we watch. Or trying to stop swearing while driving in this traffic, and well, I'm still working on that one. But it helps to realize that my life affects the whole community in ways I can't always see.

Garrison Keillor once told a story about this that has haunted me for many years. He speaks of a classic's professor named Jim who lost his job just as he was turning forty. It was a season when his family expected more and more financial provision from him in return for less and less gratitude. He caught a job in the college admissions department, hefting twice the workload for a quarter less pay. He didn't much care for the job except that he got to do it alongside a young woman named Barbara.

Jim said that to his family he had become just “Daddy the old Drudge. Earn the money and bring it home and give us more of it. But to this quiet woman I was valuable for being myself...She advised me that I was funny and smart and stylish and handsome,” things I hadn’t been in a long time. Several months into the job, Jim and Barbara were both scheduled to go to a weekend conference in Chicago. Barbara offered to drive, and Jim knew he was heading off to more than a conference.

He writes that he shot hoops with his son, packed a bag, kissed his wife goodbye, just like any ordinary boring night. He went out onto the driveway to wait for Barbara to pick him up. It all seemed so simple, so normal. As he looked at his neighborhood, Jim writes,

What I saw was a street full of houses in which men and women lived with their children. They fixed dinners there. They did laundry, read books, watched TV, cared for pets, went to church, voted in elections, rooted for the home team...and lived a life that to me has always seemed decent, and loving and honorable....This street is good for my flesh and blood.

I saw that we all depend on each other. I saw that although I thought my sins could be secret, they would be no more secret than an earthquake. All these houses, and all these families, my infidelity will somehow shake them.

It will pollute the drinking water. It will make noxious gases come out of the ventilators in the elementary school. When we scream in senseless anger, blocks away a little girl we do not know spills a bowl of gravy all over a white tablecloth.

If I go to Chicago with this woman, who is not my wife, somehow the school patrol will forget to guard an intersection and someone’s child may be injured. A sixth grade teacher will think, “What the hell”—and eliminate South America from geography. Our minister will decide, “What the hell, I’m not going to give that sermon on the poor.”

Somehow my adultery will cause the man in the grocery to say, “To hell with the health department, this sausage was good yesterday, it certainly can’t be any worse today.”

I’ll just leave the story there....except to say, that we depend on each other more than we ever know. ⁱ

Achan discovered how interconnected we are, especially as God's people. He ended up sitting on a pile of sin he didn't really even want. He thought he was a private individual whose choices made no difference to any but himself. Achan did not see how burying stolen stuff under his tent compromised the whole mission of God through his people. We depend on each other more than we ever know. Every choice matters. Whether in public or in secret. We can rip away at the fabric of community, or we can strengthen it, build it and grow it for Jesus' sake.

ⁱ Garrison Keillor, "Letter from Jim," on *News from Lake Wobegon*, March 13, 1982. Accessed at www.setonparish.com/RCIA/jim.html.