

Wanting What's Bad for Us
1 Samuel 8:4-20, 11:14-15
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The cinnamon bun sat on the counter. It was the last one. Everyone had already eaten one. My proclivity for sweets began to rationalize why it would be okay for me to eat another. I would be swimming in the pool later; I could burn off the calories. I did not want the food to go to waste. If I ate the cinnamon bun, then I would not have to prepare lunch for myself later. The excuses came easily and made a lot of sense to me. The cinnamon bun did not stand a chance. Neither did I.

The people of Israel wanted a King. These were the descendants of the people who had come out of Egypt. These were the people for whom God had given so much. Freedom, food and drink in the desert, guidance in the form of clouds of fire and dust. God had given them the tablets on Sinai to help lead and guide them. God had given them leaders who were judges and prophets to help them lead every day as obedient people to God. And yet... in the midst of a land with other nations on every side they wanted a king to lead them. The idea of having a king was so strong that it could have been like seeing a cinnamon bun sitting on the counter, except in this case they were seeing people on all sides of them eating cinnamon buns and they didn't have one and they wanted one.

Why did the people want a cinnamon bun...I mean King? Samuel had been the prophet leading them for some time now, since Eli had passed on his role to him. Samuel had grown up and had sons and the sons were not acting as the people thought they should act, nor how God thought they should act. The people knew that they would not be the leaders they needed. So, who would take their place when Samuel grew too old to hold up the responsibilities of guiding them?

The role of prophet was not one that worked well passing down the responsibilities from generation to generation. But Kings...what they had seen of them was that their power was passed down from generation to generation. They saw other nations, and they envied the organization, the power, the battle prowess of their kings and their people.

Samuel was troubled by this development and prayed to God. See that was the key difference between king and prophet. Prophets were chosen by God to lead a people; kings were not necessarily. As we would see in the future of Israel and of Judah, kings would eventually rule who had no desire to be faithful to the

one true God. And because of that the people would suffer.

God replied to Samuel's concerns. The Lord said, they have not rejected you, but rejected me. Samuel had taken their desire for a king personally. Was he not good enough to lead them? But God reassured him. They were struggling to have God as their King.

The rest of the scripture passage today details the role of Kings as David and Solomon would later institute rules and conscriptions of the people. These warnings that God gave Samuel for the people were how Kings ruled in that day.

The people still wanted a King, and God said to Samuel to listen to them and give them what they wanted. It seems like it would be a learning experience for the people. But perhaps it was also a way that God could work in the land and in the people.

The whole passage reminds me of times that we desire the things that are no good for us. By establishing a King, the people are entering into another kind of slavery. They are making it easy to put devotion of the King in the place of devotion to God. At least at this time - a king is no good for them.

Some people call them the seven deadly sins. The things that are bad for us. Pride, greed, wrath, lust, gluttony, envy, and sloth are traditionally the big things that people deal with that lead them to damaging consequences. The people of Israel here are envious. They are also scared (I wish that was a deadly sin, giving into our fear...); they want to be strong in the eyes of others. They have already lost battles; they want to be strong again in the eyes of the neighboring nations.

What are the things that we want that are bad for us?

I was reflecting on parenthood one day after a particularly grueling back and forth with the kids over pleas for sugary snacks and more screen time than normal. I thought, *what if we just let them have whatever they wanted, let them gorge themselves and let them deal with the consequences?* Some biblical interpreters read that style of parenting from the scripture today. They want a King; God says okay we warned them, let them have it and deal with the stomach aches afterward.

I have recently been looking into the usefulness of recovery programs as spiritual tools. Specifically, I have been reading about the 12-step program used in Alcoholics Anonymous. Trevor Hudson wrote a book outlining the 12 steps and how they relate to our vices of all kinds,

not just the horribly damaging afflictions of alcohol and drug abuse and gambling. It has been very trying as I look at my own flaws, my own weaknesses. If you do not know the first five steps are: 1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol-that our lives had become unmanageable. 2. We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. 3. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understood God. 4. We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. 5. We admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

I stop here at the 5th step because it is so absolutely difficult and meaningful. These first steps recognize that we cannot conquer our own weaknesses alone. In AA, you get a sponsor. Someone who can walk you through their journey and guide you and support you on your journey. God is important as well. But without both it seems according to the 12-step program that we are at a loss for dealing with those things we want but shouldn't have.

One aspect of Spirit Song's community accountability touched my heart this week. We have an active Men's Bible Study that meets on Zoom. They post resources and questions online as well. One member reached out to ask why doing the right

thing always felt bad.... It made me think of all of our day to day struggles. Why is it so hard sometimes?

Paul in the letter to the Romans chapter 7 verses 21 through 25 reflects on our weaknesses this way:

The Inner Conflict

14 For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin.[c] 15 I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. 17 But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. 20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. 22 For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, 23 but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

It seems we are all afflicted with something that we want that is bad for us.

We all want to live happily; in the whole human race there is no one who does not assent to this proposition, even before it is fully articulated.

— St Augustine, *De moribus eccl.* 1,3,4: PL 32,1312.

The problem is that we seek our own understanding of happiness. We look to the things of the world that make us happy.

St. Augustine goes on to look at this happiness...

How is it, then, that I seek you, Lord? Since in seeking you, my God, I seek a happy life, let me seek you so that my soul may live, for my body draws life from my soul and my soul draws life from you.

— St Augustine,
Confessions 10,20: PL 32,791.

In what ways do we seek after those things that end up taking up the position God wants in our lives? I am reminded of Blaise Pascal's thought in *Pensees*:

“What else does this craving, and this helplessness, proclaim but that

there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself”

[This is from page 75 of Blaise Pascal's *Pensees* (New York; Penguin Books, 1966).]

Today we have opportunities to accept that we do not need to battle our own unhealthy desires alone.

Today we see those who are online worshipping with us, those who may be in the room worshipping with us, our friends or our families and know that they want what is good for us, just as God wants what is good for us.

Reach out to someone in your community. Be open and honest about those things that are filling your life that are not good for you. Pray to our Higher Power, our God to fill those spaces that long for ...Kings...for cinnamon buns...for earthly pleasures. Reach out to someone who is struggling and offer support and guidance as they struggle. God is our strength. Let us seek God.

Amen.