

Haydenville Congregational Church
Deacon Tobias Davis
June 21, 2009
Mark 4:26-34

“Masculinity: A Third Way”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

What does it mean to be a man? This is a question I have grappled with for much of my adult life. I think it is a question that most males ask themselves, especially during adolescence. And the answer is as varied as all of the myriad human beings who have chosen to call themselves men.

What does it mean to be a man? I know the stereotypes, both good and bad. We all learn them just by living in America today.

Men are supposed to be strong.

Men are supposed to be tough.

Men are supposed to watch sports. Or play sports. Or both.

Men are supposed to drink beer.

Men are supposed to be attracted to women.

Men are supposed to mow the lawn. And change tires. And use power tools.

Men are supposed to get rid of bugs and dead mice.

The list goes on and on and on.

The Bible has its own masculine stereotypes. Again and again we see stories of men who are strong warriors, ruthless leaders, and domineering husbands and fathers. Physical and political strength are prized, as are strict self-control, unwavering faith, and rigid self-discipline. Life in Jesus' day, and in the centuries before was harsh and brutal, and the social expectations of men were even stricter than they are today.

In today's reading, David is both fulfilling an expectation of him as a man, and defying it. Although he is slaying another man in battle, which is a very stereotypical male act, the way in which he is portrayed, and the methods he uses to bring down the giant Goliath are unorthodox, and challenge the status quo of his day. More on that later.

David is not alone in the Bible in offering an alternative way to be a man. I think the most powerful example of rejection of masculine stereotypes offered in the Bible is Jesus himself. Jesus, who lived and walked among us as a man, and was known as the “Son of Man,” provided an entirely new and radical set of guidelines for masculinity. By advocating active nonviolent resistance instead of war, forgiveness instead of blame, and mercy instead of punishment, he rewrote masculinity handbook. He refused to be bound by stereotypes.

What a powerful role model for those of us who also often find it hard to conform to traditional expectations of what it means to be a man.

What does it mean to be a man?

What makes my particular struggle with this question unique is that I was not born male. 27 years ago a doctor congratulated my parents on the birth of their daughter.

But although I was not born male in the traditional sense, I know that I am meant to be a man. Without a doubt, this is the path I am meant to tread. It is an inherent feeling of rightness that I can only compare with the feeling of being in love. I can't necessarily explain it with my head all the time, but my heart knows that this is my truth. I have felt more comfortable, more confident, and more able to connect with the other people around me since I made the decision to match my appearance to my internal sense of myself.

But it still leaves me with the question of what kind of man I want to be.

I am blessed to have been raised by parents who did not believe in rigid gender roles. I was always told that girls could do anything they wanted, and be anything they wanted to be. This was a valuable lesson, and it enabled me to have a fulfilling childhood in which I played with dolls and legos, wore dresses and overalls, and baked cookies and climbed trees.

In spite of this freedom to be any kind of girl I wanted to be, I developed an internal sense of myself as a boy at a rather young age. In elementary school I played only male characters in my afterschool theater groups, and developed a rich fantasy life in which I was a boy. But already at that point, I was trying to work out what exactly being a boy meant to me. I knew I didn't want to be exactly like most of the guys in my class at school. They were too rough, too mean to each other. You know, the kind of friendships where you show how much you like the

other person by putting them down or picking on them and then laughing. Rough-edged teasing was not what I was interested in.

Instead, my internal boy was interested in chivalry and adventure. Kindness, independence, and connection to nature. Kind of a cross between Sir Lancelot and Huckleberry Finn, with a good streak of Peter Pan's playfulness thrown in.

When puberty hit, I made a concerted effort to put aside these fantasies, to give in to what I thought was my inherent femaleness. I don't believe there is any time in our lives that we are more desperate to fit in than middle school.

It was at that point that I began to grapple in earnest with the question of what it means to be a woman, to which I also had no answer. Although I still believed firmly that girls could do anything they wanted and be anyone they wanted to be, it was becoming increasingly clear that the world had certain expectations of me as a teenage girl that my gawky and awkward self was not able to fulfill.

When I discovered my attraction to women midway through high school, I thought maybe that explained why I was having such trouble being a "normal" girl. But that explanation never made complete sense to me, because I knew other lesbians who were masculine, feminine, and everything in between, and they were all comfortable with themselves as girls or women. In fact, it was an integral part of their identity as women who loved women. The word "woman" always seemed to catch in my throat when I tried to apply to myself.

While I was peripherally aware of the existence of transgender people when I was in high school, it was not until college that it hit me that I could be one of them. That this internal sense of myself could someday be externally expressed as well. Ironically, or perhaps appropriately, I was at Smith, a women's college, when I finally put two and two together and realized that the word woman had never felt like mine.

That was when I really started to struggle with this word, this concept of "man." Initially, I rejected it, preferring the more playful, the less threatening, the less responsible label of "boy" or "guy." "Man" felt too aggressive. I didn't want to be a stereotypical man, so I rejected the word outright. But I couldn't deny the pleasure and relief I felt when my friends looked at me and called me "he."

As I consciously adapted my behavior to appear more masculine, I was offered glimpses into the way in which adolescent males interact with each other when

there are no women around. It was not always a comfortable or pleasant experience for me. I remember an endless train ride up to Canada to visit my girlfriend of the time during which I was seated next to a cocky and muscular 17-year-old guy who struck up a conversation with me. When I expressed my excitement about traveling to see my girlfriend, he sneered at me, because my obvious affection somehow indicated weakness in his eyes. To him, relationships were about male dominance, not equality.

His whole attitude left a bad taste in my mouth. His derision, his innate sense that we were somehow superior, somehow better at navigating the world because of our masculinity. It was also his assumption that the best way to connect with me, a total stranger, was to make fun of my relationship.

I know now that a lot of his attitude was adolescent posturing, and he was probably just as lost trying to figure out what being a man meant as I was, but at the time it only added to my sense of confusion and struggle. If that was what it meant to be a man, did I really want to sign up for that? And if not, what was my alternative?

I knew I could not continue to try to be a woman. Many of my college friends had begun to embrace identities outside of "man" or "woman," identifying themselves as "third gender," "bi-gendered," or "genderqueer." They boldly and defiantly switched pronouns, or invented new ones for themselves. But even while I respect of their choices, I knew that I did not feel the same sense of rightness when I was seen as androgynous that I did when I was seen as male.

I also knew that there were other men out there who were much more like the kind of man I wanted to be. I had met men who were gay, straight, and/or trans who rejected the male stereotypes but still had a strong sense of themselves as men. I admired their courage to cry, to be emotionally present, and to be themselves at any cost. That was the kind of man that I wanted to be. And I was delighted to discover that the Bible itself can show me how to be the kind of man I want to be.

Which brings us back to today's readings. Take the story of David and Goliath, which I thought I knew. It is constantly referenced in popular culture. The story of the sling wielding shepherd who brought down the giant is so prevalent that I never really gave it a second thought. It's about the little guy who overthrows the big guy against all odds. But as I read it and reread it I realized that it's also about masculinity. It's about David needing to be his own kind of man, not the man others expect him to be.

Listen again to this passage:

Saul clothed David with his armour; he put a bronze helmet on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail. David strapped Saul's sword over the armour, and he tried in vain to walk, for he was not used to them. Then David said to Saul, 'I cannot walk with these; for I am not used to them.' So David removed them. Then he took his staff in his hand, and chose five smooth stones from the wadi, and put them in his shepherd's bag, in the pouch; his sling was in his hand, and he drew near to the Philistine.

Here David is claiming his own kind of masculinity. Saul wants him to wear armor. He wants him to conform to what it means to be a man: be a warrior, use the sword, do it our way. He wants David to be like him. But David says no, because he knows that in order to do God's work he has to be himself. He has to do things his way. A shepherd with a sling, accustomed to scaring away wild animals, not fighting battles. And so he has to use the tools he is familiar with, not the tools he is "supposed" to be using. I think if he had put on the armor, and donned that heavy helmet, its unaccustomed weight would have held him back. The helmet, designed for a larger man's head, would've slipped into his eyes. The sword, an unaccustomed weight in his sweaty palm might have slipped from his hand at the very moment he needed it most.

And he was ridiculed for his choices:

When the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was only a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance. The Philistine said to David, 'Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?' And the Philistine cursed David by his gods.

David is referred to repeatedly as a boy, or a handsome youth. He is not considered a man by either his peers or his enemies. And yet, he has been chosen by God to defeat Goliath. And it is his faith in God's will that gets him through the fight. His faith in God's will, and his faith in needing to express God's will by following his path, by doing things his way, not the way he is "supposed" to.

I would venture to say that the hardest battle David fought that day was not against the giant Goliath, but against the expectations of his peers.

In the New Testament, it is Jesus himself who defies expectations. Again and again he breaks with social norms to reach out to the oppressed, the shunned, and the detested. Andrea has preached before on Jesus' "soft power;" his ability to

combine the feminine and masculine attributes of his time to be more fully present to everyone around him.

That's the kind of man I want to be. A man who supports others and speaks truth to power. Who is not concerned with what he is supposed to be doing in order to conform to a stereotype, but rather with doing what he believes is right.

I think the beatitudes are one of the most succinct and moving examples of Jesus' example of a different way to be a man. Society at the time of Jesus, much like our society today, valued material wealth, physical and emotional strength. Disagreements and clashes of opinion were met with violence. Corruption ran rampant among the powerful. Men were supposed to be angry, arrogant, and aggressive. But Jesus said no. He turned expectations on their heads.

I have come to regard the beatitudes as my "to do list" of masculinity. What I hear when I read them is:

Men are supposed to mourn.

Men are supposed to be meek.

Men are supposed to hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Men are supposed to be merciful.

Men are supposed to make peace.

Of course, Jesus meant this advice for people of all genders. But I think that especially men, who are given power and advantages in our society because of their maleness, should listen to this advice.

I know I do.