

“Teams: Playing Zero Sum Games”
Psalm 42; Judges 16
September 15, 2019 Rev. Michele Ward
Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church

During our sermon series on teams this month, we are exploring ways to function and thrive in groups. As Andrew and I were brainstorming for this series, one of the first stories that came to mind was the story of Samson, Delilah, and the Philistines in the book of Judges. Delilah is one of the most derided women in the Hebrew scriptures. She is described as one of the ‘bad girls’ of the Bible, someone who uses her ‘feminine wiles’ to distract and destroy Samson. This isn’t a new concept--sexuality turned into a weapon, women as the source of seduction. What is going on in the story of Samon, Delilah, and the Philistines is much more complex than a cut and dry story of a faithful man and a conniving woman. It is a story of teams gone awry--a story of game theory.

But as I took a closer look, it became clearer to me that we have been playing a zero sum game with the way we interpret this text. One of our guest speakers this summer, Rev. Dr. Ken Evers-Hood, spoke passionately with us about the types of games we play, knowingly or unknowingly, and what kind of impact that has on the community we create as human beings. He explained to us that zero sum games are the kind where only one person or team can win in a contest of competition. One person or team’s gain is the other person or team’s loss. In these kinds of games, clear winners and clear losers emerge. Samson, Delilah, and the Philistines are playing an extreme version of a zero sum game. And Delilah and the Philistines are playing the long game with Samson.

Samson is part of a group of Israelites called the Nazarites. He was a warrior, a judge, and his strength came from his long uncut hair. His mother promised that he would be part of this elite group before his birth. He was a famous man in his community, known for major feats of strength. Earlier in the story of Samson, he tells his parents that he wants to marry a Philistine woman. This would have been a major move against the ascetic life he was supposed to live as a Nazarite. If anything, his parents would want him to marry a ‘proper’ Jewish girl. But Samson, with his strength and his position as a judge in Israel, gets what he wants. But that married life never comes to pass for them. That wedding feast ends in a similar fashion to The Red Wedding in *Game of Thrones*. Dozens of people die, including his wife and father-in-law, due in part to Samson’s anger and the violence he commits.

The Philistine community would have been remembered this tragedy when they came to Delilah to ask her to find out what gave Samson his strength. They had hoped to catch Samson when he went to see a sex worker, and it fails because Samson carries away the doors and leaves town. Now Samson’s love for Delilah comes

suddenly, right after he spends the night with a sex worker and the Philistines try to capture him. Nowhere does the text tell us that Delilah loves him. He has strong feelings for her and decides that he wants to be with her, end of story.

Delilah would have remembered this, too. It is no surprise, then, that she say yes to uncovering the source of his strength and to vindicating the lives of Samson's bride and her family. They offer her enough silver to amass a fortune and live as an independent woman for the rest of her life. What follows is a somewhat playful game, one that might look harmless and flirtatious from the outside observer. But Delilah has other motives, one that are more about protecting herself. Nowhere in this passage is Delilah named as a full blooded Philistine herself. Dr. Wil Gafney of Brite Divinity claims that Delilah might be half Israelite, half Philistine, and that her father was an Israelite. Because the Jewish lineage carries on through the mother, Delilah would not be considered a Jew. The lack of mention makes it more of a possibility than not. This would give her a unique position of power in the game that she is playing with the Philistines and with Samson. She also appears to be a self-sufficient woman, with her own house, and no other dependents. This would have been an unusual occurrence in the Middle Bronze Age when this account took place. Delilah is not the sex worker at the beginning of the story which is a common misconception with this story.

We had been placing something on Delilah that wasn't hers to carry all along. And, when we tell this story, we forget the trail of violence behind Samson and the Philistines seeking a justice of their own.

Delilah is persistent in getting what she wants. When one of her games fails, she tries another. And another. And another. Finally, her games succeed. The Philistines have what they want. Samson loses his strength and he succumbs to the Philistines. They finally have their warrior as a prisoner, and Deliah has all the silver she could ever want. Samson ends up winning in the end, according to this account. He gets his strength back at the very end, killing all of the leaders that sought his destruction. This tale pulls no punches. It is bloody and violent, full of manipulation and intrigue. It is a tale of humanity at its worst, using their critical thinking to harm and destroy someone else.

The games they all play in this account are destructive and function with the notion that Samson, Delilah, or the Philistines must respond with equal or greater force to one another in order to win. There is no reality in which anyone wins in this story, I believe, unless we look at Delilah. She is the one with the silver in the end. She does not die at the end when Samson pulls down the pillars. All the boys have killed each other off and she is left with her independent wealth and her security. I question that as the answer, too. Is the moral of zero sum game theory to "get yours while the getting is good?" That does not resonate with me as a true statement or a desirous way for us to treat each another.

This week I found myself thinking about one of my favorite shows, *The Americans*, which finished its final season in 2018. I loved this show about a Russian family living in the 1980s outside of DC infiltrating the highest levels of our federal government. It is a heartbreaking and adrenaline-pumping show. One of the characters, Page, reminds me a lot of Delilah. She is the oldest child and is caught between her parents, both of whom are Russian spies, and the American world that she lives in every day. She looks and talks and behaves like an American teenager. She has entirely different outlook on life when she realizes who her parents are. She falls in love with the boy across the street, which sounds pretty innocuous, but he happens to be the son of a CIA agent. She cannot truly love him because he is her parents' enemy. She does care about him, but she plays him a little bit and breaks his heart. And in the end of the season finale, she plays her parents. They are escaping to Canada to get away from the American government, and when they are one stop away from the Canadian border, she gets off the train. She can't stomach leaving the place that she loves because she has found that this is really her home. She takes ownership of her future in a way that surprises everyone since she was the dutiful double agent for her parents spying on the CIA agent who was the father of her boyfriend and coming home and telling her parents about it. She was part of a church, and she had to deal with all sorts of double agent requests from her parents there, too. She decides that she wants a different life.

I think about wanting a different kind of life when I think about the games that we play. There are third ways to live, and to play, and to love. You don't need to be the last one standing with all the silver in your pockets to be the winner of the game. There are different games to play, ones that involve solidarity, games that involve self-preservation certainly but games that honesty about who we are and who we are meant to be. Some folks think that stories like this are in the Bible because they are meant to teach us how to live. But I don't think that's really the case. I think stories like this are here in the book of Judges to remind us who we are not meant to be. I don't think we are really meant to be like Samson, or Delilah, or the Philistines. I think it is a hard look in the mirror. I certainly hope that none of us end up in a situation like theirs--not gory, difficult, or manipulative. We play all sorts of other games in our lives like theirs, too, with that same level of intensity and deep need for survival. My hope and prayer is that as we enter this sermon series around teams more fully is that we live into what it means to be a team working together. Amen.