

## Shimei

a sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish  
Mitchellville, MD, August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012

When David was on his death bed he gave a list of instructions to Solomon about what to do with certain people who had betrayed or offended him during his 40 year reign. Among those instructions we find this: –

“And see, you have with you Shimei the son of Gera, a Benjamite from Bahurim, who cursed me with a malicious curse in the day when I went to Mahanaim. But he came down to meet me at the Jordan, and I swore to him by the Lord, saying, ‘I will not put you to death with the sword.’ Now therefore, do not hold him guiltless, for you are a wise man and know what you ought to do to him; but bring his gray hair down to the grave with blood” (I Kings 2:8-9).

This is the second of two sermons on what we’re calling “odd characters in the Old Testament.” This character’s name is even odd to the western ear, and should probably be pronounced “shim-ee,” like “jimmy,” but we’ll emphasize the final “i” and say “shim-ee-eye.”

The story of Shimei begins right after the first reference to Mephibosheth (in II Samuel 16) when he suddenly appears in a place called Bahurim, a little village between Jerusalem and the plain of Jordan where the great King David had come on his flight away from Absalom, his own rebellious son. As a prelude to the story we read that “the hearts of the men of Israel [were] with Absalom” (2 Sam. 15:13) and that Absalom was marching toward Jerusalem to overthrow David and reign in his place. To make a long story short, Absalom had been plotting this rebellion for some time and he had secured the sympathies of many followers, perhaps the majority of soldiers in Israel and, particularly, Jerusalem. So, rather than risk his own and many other lives, as well as the possible desecration of the holy city by taking a stand there, David chose to evacuate with his followers and await better circumstances to deal with the situation. In any case he was loathe to do battle with his own flesh and blood.

Things must have looked pretty good for Absalom, therefore, when Shimei, the son of Gera, of the family of the house of Saul, came out of nowhere at Bahurim and cursed and taunted and threw stones and kicked dust at David and all his servants and mighty men. In his rant he specifically referred to “all the blood of the house of Saul,” and blamed David for all the trouble in Israel since that time.

Possibly David felt sufficiently humiliated by the memories of his own past transgressions to accept this mockery as just and deserved. More likely he simply had confidence in the Lord’s ability to lead and protect him in spite of it and therefore chose patiently to ignore it. We don’t know. But in any case David refused to have the man punished, and when Abishai suggested to the king that he “take off his head” he must have been amazed to hear this reply: –

“(for) the king said, “What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah? So let him curse, because the Lord has said to him, ‘Curse David.’ Who then shall say, ‘Why have you done so?’”

“And David said to Abishai and all his servants, ‘See how my son who came from my own body seeks my life. How much more now may this Benjamite? Let him alone, and let him curse; for so the Lord has said to him’” (II Sam 16:10-11).

Later, in a section we didn’t read today, a similar incident occurred when Shimei – seeing Absalom defeated and fearing for his own life – came and worshiped David and begged his forgiveness. Again Abishai urged his punishment by death, and again David refused, this time saying,

“‘What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruah, that you should be adversaries to me today? Shall any man be put to death today in Israel? For do I not know that today I am king over Israel?’ Therefore the king said to Shimei, ‘You shall not die.’ And the king swore to him” (II Sam 19:22).

(By the way, it was this same Abishai, David’s nephew, who had also urged David to let him kill Saul when Saul was pursuing them and they had found him asleep in some camp. And of course you remember David restrained him, taking Saul’s spear and his water jug instead.)

But all this leniency and apparent forgiveness seems to be utterly contradicted by David’s harsh commands just before his death, as in one case after another – first Joab, then Adonijah, then Shimei – he told Solomon to destroy his old enemies. Specifically with regard to Shimei he said,

“Now therefore, do not hold him guiltless, for you are a wise man and know what you ought to do to him; but bring his gray hair down to the grave with blood.”

These are King David’s last recorded words. In the next verse of the story he lies dead. What a gruesome epitaph! What a sad commentary on the state of his mind! Long after he had pardoned Shimei, years after the rebellion has been quashed, here he apparently submits to his baser instincts and contradicts himself – for revenge. – Or is there more to it? Perhaps he felt secure enough in his own leadership that he didn’t need revenge, but worried that his old enemies would undermine the rule of his son unless he began his reign by “cleaning house.” Whatever the case it’s a cruel story and seems a strange way to conclude a holy narrative.

But here’s the thing: the culture of that time among those people was very different from ours, and such cruelty was common. But as far as we’re concerned it’s not the literal sense of the story that matters as much as it is the spiritual sense. Every character and every incident is there to represent something dynamic in our own spiritual lives, and neither David nor Joab, Adonijah, Mephibosheth (as we saw last week) nor Shimei are any exception.

The story actually concerns the Word itself, the Divine truth, and our response to it. Each king from Saul to Solomon represents that truth or, if you will, the Lord Himself governing by means of the truth. But in Saul, tall and handsome but impulsive and erratic in his leadership, we see a representation of the literal sense of the Word – grounded in appearances, often contradictory and misleading, colorful and dynamic but not very reliable as a guide for life without the counsel of the spiritual sense, represented by David.

For his part David communicates tremendous confidence and strength, as does the spiritual sense, but he spends his whole life confronting his enemies, just as we through the spiritual sense

of the Word are empowered to confront our spiritual enemies in the battles of temptation.

Finally Solomon represents the Lord in the celestial sense of the Word, wisely and perceptively ruling over an expanded kingdom in peace and incredible prosperity. This is symbolic of the inner peace we experience after we have fought and won the battles of temptation in our lives.

But the kings don't just represent the Lord Himself; they also represent the way we USE His Word in our lives.

Remember, Shimei was of the house of Saul, and he carried all the bitterness and jealousy of Saul toward David whom he felt had usurped the throne. He was a son of Gera, which in Hebrew means enmity. So when Absalom, who like Saul his father represented the literal sense of the Word, appeared to overwhelm David, Shimei took advantage of the situation to vent his feelings toward the representative of better judgment and discipline. He cursed, mocked and taunted David just as those who believe only in the literal sense of the Scriptures curse, mock and taunt those who believe in the spiritual sense. But the truth is Shimei was an opportunist, basically only seeking ways to promote, justify and excuse himself. So those who claim to follow only the literal sense of the Word actually use the Word selectively for their own purposes, for without the spiritual sense it cannot really be understood.

Still, the literal sense is important! It provides a basis, a sensory container and metaphorical support for the spiritual sense. So David permitted Saul and Shimei to live, and even to rave and curse – until they were both undone by their own foolish judgments.

Now this is important. In one sense David really seemed to contradict himself when he condemned Shimei, but seen on a deeper level he knew the man's character; he knew Shimei couldn't be trusted and that unless he was kept under strict control he would cause trouble again. So Solomon, understanding this, made Shimei promise, on pain of death, never to leave Jerusalem for any reason. Spiritually speaking, Jerusalem represents the doctrine of the church, the deeper understanding of the principles that provide for a heavenly life, and as long as the literal sense is used in that context it can and must be honored. But if it gets away from those principles it loses its value and becomes, well, just another cruel, confusing story.

So Shimei continued under Solomon's reign for three years living in Jerusalem. And then one day two of his servants ran away to the Philistine city of Gath, which in Hebrew means a wine press, or rather the trough for the juice at the bottom of the press. Spiritually this suggests an intellectual process involving analysis and judgment, but in a negative sense it would represent thoughts of self-interest. Interestingly this was Goliath's home town and so it suggests a certain arrogance or pride in one's own thought. So Shimei, thinking only of himself, took off on his donkey to get his servants in Gath. Bad idea. As soon as he got back Solomon confronted him, reminded him of his solemn oath, and had him put to death.

Now let's think about this. On one hand the literal sense of the Word can never die since it holds eternal truths within it. On the other hand once we know the real *meaning* of the stories and internalize them as principles of life it is *as if* the literal sense dies because then as soon as we think about it we think about its meaning – just as we think about the *meaning* of the words in a sentence and “forget” about the words or letters themselves. But if we haven't internalized the

meaning, if the principles have *not* been impressed on our hearts, then the minute our servants take off, that is to say, as soon as our own will is not being served, we forget our commitments, saddle a donkey, and go to Gath. The donkey, of course, represents the power of our external, natural reasoning carrying us along, and the journey to Gath is an exercise in getting what we want, never mind the king's decree – or maybe this feels like a justified exception.

It's all too bad, really. It didn't have to be this way. But Solomon in his judgment of the matter represented the truth that a literal reading of the Word apart from the doctrine of love and charity is a real threat to a person's spiritual life. In fact it amounts to profanation, the deliberate abuse of truth, which of course is what his cursing of David represents.

But there's more. In a broad sense Shimei really represents literalism in all areas of our lives. And of course there are two main kinds: one is just playful, and that's OK. But the other is mean and selfish, carefully calculated to manipulate the truth and get one's own way. This is what we see in Shimei, and it is a very dangerous thing. Within it lies a spirit of deceit, self-justification, domination, and a host of other troubling attitudes.

Whether or not Solomon saw these things in Shimei we don't know. But he certainly saw that the man couldn't keep his word. And so he was condemned – not so much by Solomon or David but by his own actions. Thus the *attitude* represented by Shimei is condemned in our lives

Now, today, we tread a delicate line between the letter and the spirit in many things, but especially in regard to the Scriptures. For the letter is important – no, more than that, critical – to our understanding of the Lord, ourselves, and our relations with others. And so we must treat it with great care and discretion, which includes a level of tolerance for things in it that are crude or even outrageous by our standards. But the reason for this is that it may serve the spiritual sense, and so if it is ever separated from that spiritual sense, if we ever choose to apply the letter for our own purposes instead of the Lord's and so mock or profane the spiritual meaning within it, we are in deep trouble. The same could be said about any words spoken by a friend, a spouse, or a professional person – even a politician.

So, today, the only way we can avoid the fate of Shimei is to approach all our communication with the integrity that acknowledges the spirit behind it – the love, the truth, and the use, so that we seek and find not our own will or control of others, least of all the Lord, but rather what is good, wise, and helpful on the path to heavenly life. These are the things represented by Solomon “in all his glory,” and these are the things contained in the internal sense of the Word, which must not on any account be treated with the contempt illustrated by Shimei.

Amen.

Lessons: Leviticus 19:1-4, 9-18  
Children's talk on having a respectful attitude

II Samuel 16:5-14 and I Kings 2:36-46  
Arcana Caelestia #7933:3