

A Love that Conquers
Numbers 14:5-19
8/24/08

How many of you like a good love story or like to watch a romantic movie? Last year one of the big hits at the movies was “Enchanted” the story about a princess from a fairy tale who gets sent to New York City by the evil queen who wants to keep her son, the prince, from marrying this beautiful girl who would take her place. The princess has to adjust to life in “the real world” and try to figure out how to get back to her own dimension. She keeps reminding herself of the prince waiting for her and singing about him but the whole time she is falling in love with a real person from New York. In the end, the New York man fights a battle for her and rescues her and eventually they live happily ever after.

This is a fantasy story of course and real life love stories usually don’t involve evil queens, dragons, and people moving from one dimension to another. But one interesting thing about this story is that the princess kept trying to remind herself that she was suppose to be in love with the prince, even though she was really falling in love with the New York man and she was finding herself thinking more of him than of the prince.

When we love someone, they have a way of filling up our minds don’t they? When we first fall in love with someone, we think about them, we call them, we want to spend time with them and we miss them when they are not around.

And when we love people, we fit our lives around them. We ask their opinion about things, we try to coordinate our schedules with them, we change our plans in order to be with them. When we love someone we listen to them and take into account their input into our lives. We try to please them or to help them. We spend money on people we love, don’t we, Moms and Dads? And we generally put a lot of faith and trust in people that we love. We believe they are going to be truthful with us and that if they make a promise they will keep it.

The story we are looking at today in Numbers 14 is, in many ways, a love story. It’s the story of God loving His people, bringing the fulfillment of the

promise made to them centuries before, and them turning from that love. God had promised Abraham, several centuries before this, that He would give him a son, give him many descendants, give him the land he was living in, and bless all the earth through his descendants. Abraham, his son Isaac, and his grandson Jacob all waited for that promise. Jacob's family ended up settling in Egypt because of a famine. Jacob's son Joseph was a ruler in Egypt. But after Joseph died and time went on, Jacob's descendants, known as the people of Israel, were enslaved by the Egyptians.

Finally, after several hundred years, God raised up Moses to bring the people out of slavery in Egypt and back to the land He had promised them. Now, here in Numbers 13 and 14, Moses has brought the people to the border of the land and has sent 12 spies into the land to scope it out and bring back a report about the nature of the land and the strengths and weaknesses of the people. The spies have come back and reported that the land is good. The crops are big and healthy and they've brought back samples of the produce. It's a land flowing with milk and honey meaning it's a rich land. But the people there are great warriors and the cities are well fortified. In chapter 13:33, the spies report, "We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes and we looked the same to them."

But 2 of the spies disagreed with the general report. Caleb and Joshua believed Israel was very capable of taking the land. In 14:9 Caleb and Joshua say to the people, "do not rebel against the Lord. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will devour them. Their protection is gone, but the Lord is with us. Do not be afraid of them." The difference between the attitude of Caleb and Joshua and that of the other 10 spies is that Caleb and Joshua had a different perspective on the situation. The 10 spies said it rightly when they said "we seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes." They didn't believe they were capable of taking the land and they assumed they looked incapable to the people living in the land. Their perspective was off. They weren't taking into account that God was with them. The reason they weren't thinking this is because they were lacking in what is called in Hebrew "hesed" or covenant, loyal love. Hesed is more than just a touchy feely affection. Hesed is

a deep commitment to someone that goes beyond emotions and it implies obligation of some sort.

In this passage in Numbers 14, the 10 spies stir up the people to the extent that they are ready to rebel against Moses and go back to Egypt where they were slaves. They are rejecting the land that God had promised them because they don't believe God will keep His promise and be with them and give them the ability to conquer this land. They are calling God a liar and a covenant breaker, even though so far God has been completely faithful to them. Yes, there have been great difficulties, but God has kept every promise so far and has worked mighty miracles before their very eyes and brought them to the edge of the land. Why would He leave them now? Yet they doubt His commitment to His word. They are actually accusing God of the very thing they themselves are guilty of which is a lack of faithfulness and commitment in love. So God is ready to let them go. In 14:12, He says to Moses, "I will strike them down with a plague and destroy them, but I will make you into a nation greater and stronger than they." That word "destroy" means "disinherit." God is ready to disinherit this people, to no longer be with them and to declare them no longer part of the covenant community. Instead, He will raise up a nation from Moses' descendants and fulfill His promises to them.

Faith in God is essential. These people have no faith that God will keep His word. Hebrews 11:6 says "without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." In the concept of hesed, faith and love come together. In this story in Numbers 13 and 14, the people didn't believe God and didn't stay faithful to Him. Except for Joshua and Caleb. They believed God's promises. They had seen all that God did in bringing the people out of Egypt and they believed. They were committed to sticking with God. They kept faith with Him. And this changed their perspective of the whole situation. Yes, the people of the land were great warriors and yes, the cities were fortified. But because they kept faith with God, because they loved God, they knew He was with them and would give them the land. It changed their vision of themselves

and the challenge before them. They saw themselves as able to devour the stronger people because God had taken away the protection of those people. They didn't believe they looked like grasshoppers in those people's eyes, because they didn't see themselves as grasshoppers. They knew they were loved by God and that God was committed to them. They knew they were a people in covenant with God.

The way this story ends is that Moses has to plead with God not to destroy the Israelites. He tells God that, if God destroys this people, the other nations, including Egypt, will hear about it and think that God was not able to bring this people into the land He had promised them. They have already heard of the power and might of God in overcoming the Egyptians and that God goes with His people. But if God destroys them, the nations will think God is weak and unable to keep His promises. So Moses appeals to God's great love, His hesed, and says in 14:17ff, "Now may the Lord's strength be displayed, just as you have declared: The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished...In accordance with your great love, forgive the sin of these people, just as you have pardoned them from the time they left Egypt until now."

It is because God is so great in hesed, in faithful, committed, loyal, covenant love, that He even considers forgiving the people who have accused Him of unfaithfulness, of lying to them and abandoning them to their enemies. This is how God's great strength is displayed. He forgives. This is so opposite of the mindset of the world we live in which says strength is shown through overpowering others, through violence, through making others seem small. God's strength is shown in His ability to forgive and remain committed to His people even when we break faith with Him.

The people who rebelled against God at this point don't get away unpunished. God gives them what they want and lets them stay in the desert. They are afraid to try to take the land, they think they are weak and unable to go up against the inhabitants of the land, so God lets them stay in the desert until that generation that rebelled against Him died off. Then He brought their

descendants into the land and they settled there. Joshua and Caleb were the only two people of that generation that actually entered the land and settled there.

So what can we learn from this story? One thing is that we need to view ourselves and the challenges we face from the perspective of people who are in covenant relationship with God. We are not grasshoppers. We are the redeemed people of God, filled with His Spirit, living in covenant relationship with God, forgiven of our sins, and members of God's household. Yes, we all face challenges. There are big and scary giants in our lives and we can't underestimate that. But God is with us. Are we committed to God as He is committed to us so that we can see how big He is in relation to the giants we face? We have to keep reminding ourselves of the promises of God and believe that He will not leave us. Philippians 1:6 says "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." God is faithful to His covenant with us and will complete the work He has begun in us. Are we willing to remain faithful to Him and stay in covenant relationship with Him as Joshua and Caleb did?

One thing that struck me about this story was that everyone agreed the land was good. But not everyone agreed that God was fully vested in settling His people in the land. When I first came on staff at Oxford Circle, I went out to walk and pray around the neighborhood one day and observed the different businesses and things surrounding the church and then I came back and sat down and started journaling. I thought about the Jewish cemetery across the street, a symbol of death; the auto repair places, a symbol of broken things, the Navy Depot down the street, a symbol of violence; Kennedy hospital that used to be down the road, a symbol of sickness; the brewery that used to be back down Howell Street, a symbol of addiction; the Village, a place that is physically separated from the rest of the neighborhood and a symbol of being disadvantaged in some way. As I was journaling about all this I suddenly wrote, "This is prime real estate for the kingdom of God." Where else would God want to be? There's no better place for God to be working than right here. What

better land could God give us than right here? This is a good land even though it is full of powerful enemies and huge challenges. Like Joshua and Caleb said, we don't need to be afraid of these enemies because their protection is gone but the Lord is with us. Are we convinced that God is giving us this land and that He is with us to make us mighty so that we can overcome all the enemies and challenges we face and fully inhabit this land? I believe we are.

Our God is a God of covenant. He does not lie and He keeps His promises. And He expects us to keep covenant with Him. He does not see us as weak or powerless or lacking in any way. He does not see any one of us as less than. To Him, we are His beloved children, called by His name, filled with His Spirit, forgiven and cleansed by His blood, and there is no good thing He will withhold from us. Do we believe this? If we do, we need to show it. The title of the sermon series we are doing for the next several weeks is "Surely not, Lord!" The people of Israel responded "Surely not" when faced with the prospect of entering the land. They turned away and rejected all God had to offer them. Let's not be like that. Let's keep faith with God, keep moving forward in what He's telling us to do so that we conquer our land and settle in it and leave a spiritual legacy of faithfulness to the generations to come.