

There's a story in the Bible, in the Hebrew Scriptures, about a man named Saul. The Bible says, "There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else." What does it mean when we say someone is head and shoulders above everyone else? It isn't just a comment on their physical stature, it can also be a statement of their intelligence, talent, or general character. So Saul had many virtues, and was widely admired.

This was in the time when the Lord spoke through the prophet Samuel. The Lord had noticed Saul, so said to Samuel, "Saul is the man who shall rule over my people. He's head and shoulders above everyone else."

Saul belonged to the tribe of Benjamin, which was considered the least of the tribes. Despite Saul's growing reputation, people were surprised when the Lord anointed Saul to be king.

Especially Saul, who said to Samuel, "I think a mistake has been made."

Samuel said, "No mistake. You're the Lord's choice. Get used to the idea."

At first, Saul couldn't get used to the idea of being king, but in time he began to enjoy being the king, and after a few years Saul thought the Lord had been especially wise to make him the king. Whenever he went anywhere, he had people shout, "Long live the king."

Saul loved being the king, and came to enjoy his power, authority, and status. He became prideful and arrogant, and the Lord became sorry that he had made Saul the king over Israel, so God fired him, but Saul wouldn't go. It is a difficult matter to fire a king. Then the Lord named David as Saul's successor. Saul became crazy with jealousy and tried to kill David. On two occasions, David had it within his power to kill Saul, once when Saul was sleeping and another time when Saul was relieving himself. (The Bible is nothing if not candid.) But each time David spared Saul's life and left a note saying, "David was here." Instead of being grateful David hadn't killed him, this made Saul angry. Consumed with shame and fury, unable to kill David, Saul committed suicide by falling on his sword, rather than surrender his status as king.

We've been talking about letting go and holding on, how often this theme appears in the Bible, and how often it appears in our lives, as we struggle to discern when it is best to hold on to a belief or tradition or relationship, and when it is wise to let go. The last time we were together, I said one way of knowing it is time to let go of a belief or tradition is when that belief or tradition hurts another person. No tradition or belief that hurts, degrades, or diminishes another human being can honor God.

This morning, I would like to talk about letting go of status, and how difficult that can be for us.

I was reminded of this last week, when I was visiting our son Spencer. He is renovating a building on the Danville town square, so I stopped by to say hello and see his progress. There was a woman there who, intrigued by the makeover, had come inside the building to look around. We had never met, so she introduced herself and asked my name.

I said, "My name is Phil Gulley."

Her face lit up.

I immediately thought, "She's going to talk about one of my books." Writers never tire of such moments.

She said, "Oh, my gosh, oh, my gosh. You're married to Mrs. Gulley, the librarian. My daughter loves her."

I hadn't understood what it meant to live in someone's shadow, but when your spouse is head and shoulders above you, you need to grow accustomed to it. Now here's what's interesting. I began to feel depressed and forgotten. Then I went home and there was an e-mail from a church that had invited me to speak, but had changed their mind. It wasn't like they couldn't afford me. It was a friend's church and I had agreed to speak for free. Free, for crying out loud, and they still didn't want me. If there had been a sword around, I would have fallen on it. So this morning let us think about letting go of stature and status, how difficult it is, how inevitable it is, and how we can transcend that and remember what always endures.

I was at an assisted living center this past week visiting a friend, and fell into conversation with a man who told me he and his wife had moved to the assisted living center the year before. I asked him how he liked it.

He said the workers were nice and the food was good. Then he said, “But I liked it better when I was somebody.”

Like many of us, he equated his vocation with his value. When he was working, and had a position of authority, he was somebody. When he retired, he felt like a nobody. Of course, he wasn’t a nobody, but that is how he perceived himself, and I could tell that depressed him.

How do we let go of status? How do we realize that what we do is not who we are? The early Quakers observed how often one’s station or vocation determined their value to society, so resolved to treat the king and the commoner as equals. It was not intended to be a demotion of the king, but a promotion of the commoner. It was intended to remind the high-born and the low-born of their equality before God. And it served one additional purpose: to remind people that their worldly rank not only had no bearing on their status in God’s kingdom, their station in life, their titles, their class, was no indication of their value. So don’t hold on to those ranks and privileges and powers because in the end they mean nothing, they are no more substantial, no more enduring than a wisp of smoke.

When we let go of our status, and the day will come when we will all have to let go of our status and position, either willingly or unwillingly, will life still be good? Will we still be somebody? Will we still be valued?

That depends upon us. If we have tied our value to our vocations, if we have measured our worth by our title, fame, or fortune, the day will come when those things will no longer sustain us, and what will be left is our core, our true center, the people we really are, the true self.

Kings don't last. Titles and prestige fall away as surely as withered flowers. No matter how tightly we cling to them, there will come a time to let them go.

It is a bit like this. When I was a teenager, I bought my girlfriend a golden ring. It cost thirty dollars and I was told it was solid gold. Because I knew nothing about the value of gold, I believed the man who told me it was solid gold. So I bought the ring and gave it to my girlfriend as a gift. Within a few weeks, the gold plating had worn through down to the pot metal underneath.

All our titles, all our fame, all our fortune is plated gold. When we let go of these things, we discover what we're made of, whether our lives are pot metal or solid and prized.

Saul stood head and shoulders above everyone else, but died a diminished man. He let go of character to hold on to the shiny bauble of a title, and in the end, lost both.