Sunday, August 23, 1981
THE BIGGER THEY COME, THE HARDER THEY FALL
Judges 13:2-8, 16:28-31

The worship of size, power, brute force, and bigness is nothing new. Our history and our legends are filled with examples of people who were giants — Paul Bunyan, Hercules, Superman, the Incredible Hulk, and more. And in the Old Testament of the Bible there is Samson.

According to the Hebrew stories, Samson had all the gifts that any human being could have possessed — enormous physical strength, gigantic size, daring flash, likeableness. Like the heroes in many of our stories, he was a lover and a fighter, even more so than John Wayne of the movies. His exploits were the kind that made for drama and entertainment. Yet the story of Samson is one of tragedy and failure. This morning we want to see what we can learn from his failures.

Because of Samson's physical size and strength, the people of his country expected him to be a tremendous leader in their time of need. The Hebrews had entered the promised land before he was born and were hard at work trying to pull themselves together in their new country. Samson was to have been part of the answer to this process; yet he never lived up to his extraordinary potential. He spent his days rather as something of a buffoon and an ineffectual playboy. Why was this so? How did one who had all the makings of a winner wind up at the end such a loser?

To answer these questions, first let's look at Samson's family background. He was born into a religious home. His parents had been childless for years. One day they had a message from God that they would have a son. Naturally the parents were pleased and excited about the possibility. They agreed from the beginning that they would do their best to raise this child in the best possible way. In fact, one of the most beautiful brief prayers in the Bible is offered by Samson's father, Manoah, when he learned he was to be a father. He prayed, "O God, teach us what we are to do with the child who is to be born to us." This is exactly how anyone should react to the awesome news that he or she is about to be entrusted with a human life — asking God to send with the child the accompanying wisdom to be a good parent.

In other words, like most of us who discover that we are going to be parents, Samson's father and mother had good intentions. But their practices were too narrow and too rigid.

As Samson grew up, his parents continued to make decisions for him. They didn't help him mature in his mental capabilities. When children are young, we have to make many decisions on their behalf, but gradually they need to be helped to make decisions on their own. That's part of the process of growing up. It's what maturity is all about.

But Samson never learned to think things through on his own. He never learned to use his mind along with his physical strength, and thus he came more and more to trust primarily in his size and power. At the same time, he lacked spiritual strength and direction. Even though his parents had a strong and even fanatical religious faith, he never made that faith much of his own, and his parents on their part did little to nurture his religious faith. They gave him rules and regulations but little more. There were more don'ts than dos. They were committed, devout people, but lived what we would call a narrow, rigid life. They had not learned that our minds are as much a gift from God as our emotions.

They had not learned that the ability to think is just as valid in one's religious life as the ability to feel and to follow rules. It is not enough to be zealous and passionately committed. The need for intelligence is just as great as the need for emotional intensity.

Thus, Samson felt God's Spirit in his life, but didn't know how to interpret or respond to that Spirit. He knew there was more to religion than just following a set of rules that his parents had given him but didn't know what that "more" was. So, Samson simply gave in to his feelings of the moment.

The problem is that our feelings can and do often mislead us, and Samson's feelings were no different from ours. Furthermore, it meant that he never thought through his immense physical power. He never considered that it could be misused. It lacked discipline. Rather he came to believe that all problems could be solved by brute force, and he also did not reckon with the fact that one day he could lose his physical power.

So, Samson never got beyond the level of acting out what he was feeling at a given moment. There was no such thing as delayed gratification "in his experience. If he saw something he wanted, he had to have it irnr11ediately and there were few people around to stop him. If he saw a woman he wanted as his wife, he took her. If he saw a prostitute he wanted to be with, he took her.

But this lack of discipline was also his downfall. We are told in the Bible that after his affair with the prostitute, he met another woman named Delilah. She was a Philistine, and the Philistines were the lifelong enemies of the Hebrews. But that didn't bother Samson, he was sure that in the end his physical strength would save him from anything.

By this time, Samson was something of a legend to the Philistines because of his immense power and destructive behavior, and when they found out that he was infatuated with one of their women, they offered her fantastic bribe to uncover the secret of his strength so that they could capture, him.

When Delilah began to beg Samson for the secret of his strength, he played games with her and didn't take her seriously. He was so unaccustomed to serious self-reflection that he did not even realize what she was doing or what her intentions were. He lived the "unexamined life."

After playfully giving Delilah several answers about his strength which proved to be false, Delilah finally got him to tell her the secret of his long hair, and with that she promptly lulled him to sleep, cut off his hair and took away his power. The Philistines came and easily captured him. They gouged out his eyes and reduced him to the role of an animal and a spectacle for years to come.

As time passed, his hair grew back, and the Philistines had him appear one day at one of their cultic celebrations. After he had been paraded around in ridicule, Samson asked to be taken to the place where the pillars that help up the large arena were located. There, he prayed one last prayer — a prayer of anger, hostility, and revenge. "Please God restore my strength one more time so that I may give these people a taste of their own medicine."

Then Samson grabbed the two middle pillars of the arena, and he leaned his weight upon them and pulled the pillars away from their footings and the entire building fell upon him and all the people in it. He killed all the spectators as well as himself.

This ancient story of Samson has several things to teach us as individuals and as a nation.

1. First, the story warns us of the danger of undisciplined power. Samson's immense power was at the disposal of his emotions and that is always a dangerous combination for individuals and for nations. Suppose the present dictator of Libya had a nuclear arsenal at his disposal?

Samson most often used his immense power without thinking it through first. He simply reacted. He threw his weight around. He tore down more than he put up. Sometimes the powerful nations of the world have wanted to use their power too quickly. In a time of nuclear power, it's even more important that the use of our power be extremely disciplined.

Like Samson, giants always face special temptations. The more power we have, the more disciplined it has to be. The problem with undisciplined power is that its use will often destroy the user as well as those the power is being used against. In the end, Samson destroyed himself as well as many of his enemies. In a nuclear conflict in our time, those using nuclear weapons will likely be destroyed as much as those the weapons are being used against. And in the end no one actually wins.

2. Secondly, the story of Samson and his power is a warning against the worship and trust which we tend to place in power. Samson's biggest mistake was in believing that pure power would solve any problem. "Knock em dead." "Beat them up." "Bomb them to hell!" We too have to be extremely careful lest we worship power as if it were God. Someone suggested in a letter to the editor this past week that we put on our coins instead of "In God we Trust," "In bombs we trust." It's an insidious form of idolatry.

We like to say, for example, "The only thing the Russians understand is military power." That's an extreme oversimplification. Certainly, they have a strong respect for military power, but they can be dealt with in other ways as well. After all, Samson was defeated by someone much weaker than he as far as physical strength is concerned. We are in trouble as a nation when we come to believe that all of our foreign policy problems can be solved with military power.

The true strength of this nation is to be found elsewhere. Samson's true strength was elsewhere but he never discovered it because he was misled by his own personal physical strength.

3. Thirdly, as I read the story of Samson and Delilah over and over again this past week, I also became aware of the fact that Samson's tragedy had to do with his inability to love and to receive love. All the re1ationships he had with women were of the kind where he simply used them. And because he used them, he was not able to tell when he was also being used. Thus, he easily told the secret of his strength to Delilah.

If Samson had only been more reflective; if he had only thought through just a little bit the question of how he could best use his gifts to serve God and others, then he wouldn't have been so careless about his power. Think about it — what gifts has God given you? How can these gifts best be used and not mis-used so that they enhance life rather than being destructive?

The story of Samson also shows that no matter how strong we are, we also always have our weak side. In fact, just when we think we are the strongest is when we are often the weakest. The bigger they come, the harder they fall.

On the other hand, as St. Paul reminds us in the New Testament, when we are weak, then we are strong. In other words, when we are reflective and honest enough to admit our weaknesses, then we are strong. Also, when we admit our weaknesses, then we make room for God’s strength in our lives. Amen.