

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Five Smooth Stones”**

1 Samuel 17:32 – 49

June 21, 2015

Graduation Sunday

Most of us probably know the biblical account of David and Goliath, that we read together this morning; the story of the young, small, unimposing shepherd boy... who took on the nine-foot-tall Philistine warrior who massacred rival soldiers for a living. And won!

Even folks who've never picked up a Bible in their life are acquainted with the phrase “David vs. Goliath...” and know that, today, it refers to a game or a contest between two hopelessly mismatched opponents, where one of them seemingly has no chance to win. Think of me, in a two-mile footrace against cross-country runners Kyle Vella and Alex Patricolo. They'd be able to shower, have lunch, and take a nap before I staggered across the finish line... I'd be David and a half compared to those guys! Or, suppose I took on Delaney Jones in a long-jump competition. She'd be setting records, while I'd be the first athlete in the history of Southampton to not be able to even reach the sand landing pit! You'd need a tape-measure to record Delaney's jumps... but a ruler would be more than enough for mine! Once again, I'd be David, through and through!

Of course, sometimes, like in the biblical text, our David's also come out on top. Think of the 1969 Miracle Mets vs. the mighty Baltimore Orioles in the World Series; or the Joe Namath Jets facing the unbeatable Colts in Super Bowl III. And who could forget the US ice hockey team beating the Soviet Union in the 1980 Winter Olympics? Such examples abound, so the “David vs. Goliath” scenario is something that we're all pretty familiar with. And, certainly, as we look at the biblical text, the David and Goliath story in First Samuel really does look like... a typical “David and Goliath” contest!

I already mentioned that Goliath was nine feet tall; and if that wasn't intimidating enough, he was also armed to the teeth with spears, swords, javelins, body armor, leg greaves, and an extra-large helmet... not to mention his own personal shield-bearer. David, on the other hand, looked like a refugee from one of our Live Nativity productions; dressed in a typical Middle-Eastern tunic, perhaps with a rope belt around his waist, wearing Cooper's Beach-approved sandals on his feet... and what our text calls a “shepherd's bag,” something like an ancient fanny-pack, probably slung over his shoulder.

King Saul had tried to give David his personal sword, shield, and armor... but the poor kid could barely stand up under the weight of all that bronze. So, David chucked all the high-tech weaponry and instead went to battle with nothing but the sling that he used to ward off lions, bears, and other dangerous predators... when he was out tending the family sheep.

The sling consisted of two cords, which were probably made from braided flax or wool. The cords were attached to a small leather cup or pouch, into which a stone or other projectile would be placed. After a few good wind-ups, the shepherd would release one end of the sling... and the projectile would fly, missile-like, at its target. In the right hands, it was a very effective

weapon. To go along with the sling, the text tells us that David “chose five smooth stones from the stream;” these he put “in the pouch of his shepherd’s bag,” and, thus armed, he “approached the Philistine,” Goliath.

Well, the super-sized Goliath took one look at this willowy young shepherd, approaching him for battle, and immediately blew him off. “*What am I, a dog; that you come to me with sticks?*” From the Philistine’s point of view, this fight was going to be no contest. But David answered, “*You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.*”

And with that, David slung one of his “smooth stones” right smack into Goliath’s unprotected forehead, knocking him down and out; he then proceeded to take the giant’s sword and cut his head off with it... causing panic in the Philistine army, which then turned tail and fled, with the army of Israel in hot pursuit. It’s a pretty gruesome story; but it shows what Almighty God can accomplish with one small kid, five smooth stones, and a heart that’s open to the presence and power of the Lord.

Now, you may be wondering what on earth David and Goliath have to do with Graduation Sunday. But I believe that this story is perfect for a day like this; because each of our graduates, in his or her own way, will be facing their own showdown with Goliath, in the weeks and years ahead. Not that they’re going to be taking on nine-foot giants, bristling with spears and swords and all that jazz; but they *will* be doing battle with forces that are just as dangerous, just as intimidating, just as potentially damaging to life and faith... as the biblical Goliath threatened to be.

Our graduates will be facing *the Goliath of self-absorption*; the Goliath that whispers to us that the meaning of our life consists in wealth and status and privilege and filling the minds of others with thoughts of ourselves. This Goliath would have us believe that life is “all about me;” and in so believing, we lose track of why God has given us life in the first place. Our graduates will also square off against *the Goliath of stress, distraction, and over-busyness*; the Goliath that so fills our every waking moment with concerns about *this* life... that we’ve got no energy left to be concerned about *the life to come*; and how *that* life should be influencing the way in which we live *this* life.

The Goliath of doubt and uncertainty will surely confront our graduates, as they move more fully into a culture which says that faith is for fools, weaklings, and intellectual cripples; and that a *real* man or woman doesn’t need a relationship with God in order to get by. And there’s *the Goliath of hate*; the Goliath of *apathy*; the Goliath of *indifference to the needs of others*; the Goliath of *fear and anxiety* over what we should do, and where we should go, and how we should proceed in the living of our lives. All of these Goliaths, and plenty more besides, are out there waiting for our graduates... and for all of us engaged in the quest to live the life of Christian discipleship in our broken and hurting world.

And, lest we plummet into despair, I want to remind our graduates, and all the rest of us, that, like David so long ago, we don’t face off against these various Goliaths unarmed! It’s true that the Goliaths of our world bear some pretty fearsome weaponry; but, so, too, do we! David carried “five smooth stones” into his battle with Goliath; and we have some smooth stones of our own... stones which will enable us to withstand any attack, by any Goliath, that this crazy world might throw at us.

And these aren't stones that we find in some streambed somewhere; they're stones that we find in our hearts... in our souls... in our conviction to stand upon the Lord our God, who made us, and who loves us, and who's promised to be with us every step of the way of life. So, very briefly, here are the "five smooth stones" that I challenge our graduates to carry with them, every single day... into the post-high school life that's before them:

First of all: **faith**. Never forget that each and every one of you is a Christian disciple, a beloved child of God, a card-carrying citizen of our Lord's eternal kingdom. That's not just a fact, a detail, a piece of minutiae about you; it's **what** you are... it's **who** you are. And it's who you'll **be**, wherever the coming years take you.

Look, I know that the Christian life is full of ups and downs, fits and starts, good days and bad days, and on, and on, and on. You're going to go through periods where you don't want to go to church... where you don't have time to attend to spiritual things... where your faith is pretty much the farthest thing from your mind. Okay, fine. That's the way life is these days. But no matter what kind of shape your faith might be in, from one day to the next; no matter what kinds of doubts, or questions, or fears, or problems you may be struggling with in your life; no matter **what**: don't you **ever** forget who you **are**! A Christian! A disciple! A child of God Almighty!

Nothing will help you more, against the Goliaths of our world, than the conviction that you belong to God... and that He is the ultimate source of hope, wisdom, and meaning for your life. So, that's your first smooth stone: **faith**.

Here's a second smooth stone for you: **the Bible**. Each of you received a study Bible from the church at the time of your Confirmation... and I want to encourage you to bring that baby along with you when you head off to school, or wherever you're planning to go in the weeks ahead.

I know, I know... you're probably not going to have a lot of time for Bible reading; but take it with you anyway. And don't pack it away in a closet or hide it under your bed; put it out somewhere where you can see it. And when you have few free minutes... take it down and read a verse or two. Read through the gospels, and be reminded of the love that Jesus has for you. That biblical smooth stone is full of wisdom, encouragement, grace, and guidance... and it will help you greatly in your battles with the world's Goliaths. So hang on to it; don't forget about it; and refer to it as often as you can. And that's your second smooth stone: **the Bible**.

For a third smooth stone, I would highly recommend what I call **honor**; or **integrity**. And by honor and integrity, I mean be a person who tells the truth; be a person who accepts responsibility for his or her actions; be loyal, and fair, and just; when you make a mess of some thing or other, stand up and say, "That was my fault. I blew it."

If you carry honor and integrity into your battles with the world's Goliaths, you're going to be ten steps ahead... because there are so many people in this world who wouldn't know honor and integrity if it ran up and bit them on the fanny. This world desperately needs people who are honorable, and dependable, and just. And that's what I challenge you to be, as you make your way into the larger world out there. And, by the way, being honorable is absolutely a quality of mature Christian discipleship! So, when you live your life with integrity, you are living out your faith. And that's why the third smooth stone to keep in your shepherd's bag is **honor and integrity**.

A fourth smooth stone for you to carry with you at all times is **courage**. Guts, backbone, fortitude, conviction. Young David had to have tons of courage to go out and face his Goliath; well, we need to have some courage, too, in order to face the Goliaths of our own lives.

Resisting the accepted Goliaths of our world is often not the easy thing to do, or the safe thing, or the popular thing. Many times, standing up to Goliath will put us at odds with the values, attitudes, prejudices, and opinions which prevail in our culture. And to take that kind of stand requires courage on our part. So, I challenge you to be courageous, and don't be cowed into going along with the crowd just because Goliath looks scary. And remember, courage, too, is part of the life of Christian faith; as we know from the example of Jesus, and Paul, and Moses, and Elijah, and all the disciples, and, of course, David himself. So always carry that fourth smooth stone with you, the stone of *courage*.

The fifth, and final, smooth stone that I encourage our graduates to carry with them into this next phase of their lives, is *prayer*. Keeping in touch with your Heavenly Father; bringing your needs and concerns before the Lord's throne of grace; giving thanks to God when your life is happy... seeking mercy from God when your life is painful.

Even if you get too busy to read the Bible; even if you temporarily get out of the habit of going to church; even if you go through periods of questioning about your faith; when you stand face to face with one of this world's Goliaths, you can still bow your head and say: "*Lord, please help me. Lord, give me strength. Lord, be with me... and show me the way to go.*" And you will be in touch with a source of strength against which no form of Goliath will ever be able to stand! So that's your fifth smooth stone: *prayer*.

So there you go, my young graduate friends. Five smooth stones to carry with you, when you prepare to take on Goliath. *Faith, the Bible, integrity, courage, and prayer*. With these smooth stones in your shepherd's bag... you'll be ready to conquer the world!

Graduates, on behalf of your church family, may I say that we love you! And we are proud of you! And we celebrate with you... all your great accomplishments in high school, and all your great accomplishments to come! And I promise that we will pray for you; and we will always be here for you; and we will listen to you... when you tell us about all the great things that Almighty God is doing in your lives!

God bless you... and God be with you in all your future days! And don't forget to bring... your five smooth stones!

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!