

“Three Fools and a Wise Woman”
(1 Samuel 25)

I hope you’re enjoying our sermon series on “Profiles in Courage, Grace, and Wisdom,” which focuses on the extraordinary lives and ministries of some very gifted women in the Old Testament. I pray that the Holy Spirit has blessed and challenged you through the courageous leadership of Deborah and Jael and the bold prayer and extravagant gratitude of Hannah. Next week you’ll have a real treat, as a gifted young woman of God and a former student of mine, the Rev. Rebekah Clapp, brings us a message about a little-known but impressive woman of God in the OT, the prophet Huldah.

Today we’re focusing on Abigail, a woman who speaks truth to power and wisdom to foolishness. Confession time: Whenever I read or hear this story from God’s Word, especially when Abigail says bluntly, “My husband’s name is Fool, and he lives up to it” (v. 25), the image that always springs to mind is Mr. T’s face. (Remember the A-Team?) In fact, it was really tempting to title this message with Mr. T’s pithy phrase: “I pity the fool!” But to avoid any misinterpretations that might have occurred if that title had flashed across our electronic sign for a week, I opted instead for: “Three fools and a wise woman.”

It’s easy to identify the smart, savvy, courageous woman in this story. And it seems pretty obvious who the fool with a capital “F” is. But there really are three “fools” with whom Abigail has to deal in 1 Samuel 25:

- First, there is **Nabal**, a rude and mean-spirited man whose very name means “fool.” He is so deeply entrenched in his self-centered folly that no words of warning can penetrate his mind and heart. But there are also other foolish men in this story.
- Most significantly, there is **David**. He is not a hardened fool like Nabal, but rather is a good man who has stubbornly set

his feet on a foolish path. Blinded by rage and a wounded ego, his chosen course promises disaster for himself and others.

- And then there are **David's men**. They seem to be blindly loyal to their leader, and they fail to step in with wise counsel when he chooses poorly. Their go-with-the-flow complicity in foolishness puts their own well-being in jeopardy.

This morning we want to consider both sets of characters in this story—the wise woman and the fools. So let's dig in!

Abigail speaks truth to power and wisdom to foolishness. In order to give her actions some context, let's recap the story the precedes her involvement:

Once upon a time, a very rich and very nasty man named Nabal was married to a very beautiful and very intelligent woman named Abigail. Nabal's many flocks and shepherds spent the winter months seeking out good pasture spots in the wilderness. This happened to be the same wilderness where David and his men were hiding out from the murderous rage of King Saul. David had gathered around himself a miniature army of juvenile delinquents and social misfits, and during that winter in the wilderness, they lent "muscle" and "protection" to Nabal's servants and flocks. It's not clear whether David did this out of the goodness of his heart, or if it was a calculated play for future benefits. Either way, David and his men behaved honorably towards Nabal's servants and property.

Now, the rules of ancient eastern hospitality and neighborliness were based on reciprocity—David's kindness *to* Nabal would most certainly be repaid by an equally generous kindness *from* Nabal. So in the spring when Nabal's shepherds take the sheep back to their master's compound for shearing, David sends a delegation to them. In extremely respectful language, they remind Nabal of the protection they had offered to his property and they ask for a share in the celebratory meals that Nabal is providing for his people. In a shocking turn of events, instead of responding with the expected hospitality, Nabal spits out rude, scornful insults to David and his men. When the men repeat these to David, he swells up with a terrible, blinding rage and promises that he will make Nabal pay in

blood for those insults. It reminds me of images from the animal world—two roosters intent upon destroying each other, or two mountain goats with horns locked, fighting to the death of one or both of them. This is foolishness and insult compounded by reciprocal foolishness and threats of violence.

It's into this mess that Abigail must step. One of Nabal's servants, with clear-eyed understanding of the impending consequences of his master's actions, reports to Abigail what has happened. He entrusts the matter to her judgment, with an amazing confidence in her ability to intervene. He is not disappointed, because Abigail acts quickly and decisively. She gathers up an abundance of provisions—probably far more than the original request anticipated—and heads out to meet David.

Can you imagine the drama of the scene? Abigail's entourage is coming around one side of the mountain, David's around the other. Foolishness is about to collide with wisdom! David's heart is pounding with rage, Abigail's with trepidation and determination.

There are four important aspects to Abigail's actions and attitudes that are worthy of our attention:

- First, she **chooses her dialogue partner wisely**. From long experience, she knows that her husband will not heed anyone's instruction or correction, so she doesn't even bother to try to stop *his* foolishness. However, she hopes that David's proven character can overcome his momentary madness, and she focuses her efforts on him.
- Second, she **acts boldly**. In this scene of two entourages coming together, it is David who holds the power and she puts herself—and her servants—at great risk by getting in the way of his anger. Despite whatever real fears she had, however, she steps boldly into the gap between two foolish men.
- Third, she **humbles herself**. She bows to the ground before David and addresses him with greatest respect. She offers to take on herself the blame for her husband's recklessly rude behavior and pledges to make right the insults David has received (vs. 23–24). Her humble posture and gentle words

reverse the flow of the narrative, providing the first check on David's swelling anger. She models what Proverbs 15:1-2 says so well: "*A gentle answer deflects anger. . . The tongue of the wise makes knowledge appealing.*"

- These three actions—wise choice of dialogue partner, humility, and bold risk taking—allow her the opportunity to speak truth to David. She **calls him to live into his true, God-given identity**. "Remember who you are, David!" And who *is* David? He's the same man who just one chapter earlier had pardoned the life of King Saul when it was in his power to kill him, forgiving the multiple insults and assassination attempts that the king had done against him. Abigail gently but firmly reminds David: "You're not a man who gives into petty vengeance! Don't be that man! Don't let the words of a fool drive you to sin. Don't let blood guilt be a staggering burden on your future. Remember that God will take care of your honor," she says. "Your life, David, is safe in the care of LORD, secure in his treasure pouch!" (v. 29, NIV).

As she finishes speaking, in the space between verses 31 and 32, we hold our breath, wondering—how will David respond to Abigail's wisdom, humility, boldness and truth-speaking?

David responds to truth and wisdom. This is one of the defining moments of David's life and leadership. By retaliating against Nabal, will he allow himself to become like Nabal—hardened in his folly, closed to correction, unteachable, and unreachable? Or will he recognize his path toward vengeance for what it is—an ego-driven, sinful choice that is out of character for him and unworthy of God's call on his life? Will he stubbornly stay the course, worried about losing face in front of his men and in front of this beautiful, courageous woman, or will he allow wisdom and truth to confront him in a transformative way?

We sigh with relief when David proves that he is still sensitive to the voice of God's Spirit. The very first words out of his mouth are a recognition that Abigail has been sent by the Lord. "*Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, who has sent you to meet me today!*" (v. 32). In

response to the divine message and the human messenger, David takes three important steps:

1. He **blesses** her wisdom. *“Thank God for your good sense! Bless you for keeping me from murder and from carrying out vengeance with my own hands”* (v. 33).
2. He **acknowledges** the truth of her assessment of his behavior and **confesses** it as folly. *“I swear by the Lord, the God of Israel, who has kept me from hurting you, that if you had not hurried out to meet me, not one of Nabal’s men would still be alive tomorrow morning”* (v. 34). It’s as if, through Abigail’s words, he suddenly realizes how his desire for vengeance could have put his entire future at risk. He offers no defensiveness, no “spinning” his behavior to make it seem more acceptable, no shifting of blame. He simply recognizes the truth about himself, names his sin for what it is, and confronts it head on.
3. He **accepts** from her hand what she has brought (not just the food but the correction) and **heeds** her words (v. 35). Accepting correction is a key action of wisdom in response to reprimand and generous grace. As Walter Brueggemann has observed, David enters the scene the prisoner of his own folly and sinful rage, but when he heeds the voice of truth spoken through Abigail, he leaves the scene a free man.

Just in case you were wondering about Nabal’s response, Abigail’s assessment of him was right on target. When she finally finds him in a moment of sobriety and tells him about the radical action she took to prevent a massacre, rather than being grateful, he is so shocked he has a stroke that leaves him paralyzed. Ten days later he is dead, struck down by the hand of the Lord. Abigail’s wise words are proven true—God does indeed show himself to be the Defender and Vindicator of the righteous, the One to whom vengeance belongs.

So what? Where do I (we) fit in this story? What is the Holy Spirit saying to me (or to us) through these characters and their actions? Most importantly, what are we going to do about it?

Perhaps you find yourself today in **Abigail's** position. You have the uncomfortable sense that God is calling you to speak truth to power or wisdom to folly in some particular context. Perhaps the Spirit is pressing that call upon you with a kind of urgency, and you are downright frightened of what it might mean to respond in obedience. Be reminded of the things that shaped Abigail's courageous confrontation with David. (1) She chose her dialogue partner wisely. Some conversations with the foolish powerful or the powerful foolish are a waste of breath; others bear the potential for significant transformation. Let the Spirit help you discern the difference! (2) She took bold, decisive action, even though she was genuinely afraid and even though the risk was real. If the Spirit tells you to "get up and go," then get up and go! (3) Abigail humbled herself and approached David with a gentle spirit and well-chosen words. Ask the Spirit to check your attitude and provide you with gentle words. (4) And finally, Abigail spoke truth, and called David to live into his true, God-given identity.

Or maybe you find yourself today in **David's** position. You're on a path of folly, goaded on by a bruised ego or a deep-seated resentment or a stubborn determination to do things your way, no matter what. Maybe God has already or will set a brother or sister in your path as the voice of truth and wisdom. How will you respond? Will you allow the Holy Spirit to give you a course correction? Will you accept the wise counsel and the truth-speaking as a gift from God? Will you name your folly, confess it, and leave it behind?

As we move from Word to Table, let us come with humble hearts and willing spirits, to receive the life of truth and wisdom that Jesus offers us. For the Abigails among us, bring your fears to the table and exchange them for the holy boldness of the empowering Spirit of Jesus. For the Davids, bring your folly to the table and leave it there, and go your way forgiven and free!