Today, Samuel tries to warn the people in his community about the risks of placing a king over their land to rule them. Samuel knows that people will lose their freedom. That people will become enslaved and forced into positions and places that they would rather not go. He knows that an earthly ruler will place all sorts of limitations on their ability to do God’s work in this world. The division of their land and property described in the reading sound almost like a tithe but this tithe is not to God or a synagogue community but to the king and his minions, for his coffers. I don’t know about you, but I have a problem with authority figures. I have of course had to work it out as I am a priest who serves under the authority of a bishop and hired by this community of people at St. David’s. I am also a chaplain who has a manager and a whole hierarchy of bosses above her. But it has not always been easy. My issues with authority probably come from my parents and grandparents. I was able to iron these relationships out and am very aware that sometimes when my emotions are stirred up it is a reaction to past events. When we as individuals and a community let our emotions and other earthly things get in the way with our relationship with God we lose sight of what’s important. In the case of Samuel’s people they wanted to be like their neighbors and be governed like them and they coveted what they perceived to be a better way of life. While hardening our hearts sounds antiquated to modern ears it is what happens when the bitterness and hurts of life events prevents us from seeing beyond ourselves. When we can’t see beyond our own feelings to seek forgiveness and when possible reconciliation, than we lose sight of the one who continually seeks us, God. I just finished a book my friend Diana recommended to a group of us for a book discussion called, Call to Grace by Serene Jones. Serene, is from Oklahoma and she is the first female president of Union Theological Seminary, she is also a theologian. Her grandfather Dick Jones was a complicated man, misogynist, bigot and her family was part of the rush to acquire land in America by displacing and murdering Native Americans. She gives a very honest account of how she wrestles with what she knows to be true about God while dealing with her own very real, raw emotions about her own life events and those from her families’ past. For instance, it took her years to get through her hatred of the actions of Timothy McVeigh the man who placed a bomb in the Okahoma state building. His actions affected her directly as her brother in law was working across the street. She personally knew many people affected by this bombing. She had intense emotions of bitterness toward her husband whom she divorced, and towards her mother who was very difficult and downright mean and insulting to Serene and her sisters. Her mother in her late years had dementia and revealed over and over again to her daughters and husband an affair she had with a man she claimed to love more than her husband. Serenes’ dad could not reconcile himself with his life thinking it all was a lie. He like Serene, is a theologian but could no longer talk or think about God after his wife shattered his beliefs about what he thought was a loving relationship. His world view which had revolved around objectifying his wife did not allow for him to see beyond his grief when he learned that what he had perceived as his life was not validated by his spouse. When he lost track of God’s presence in his life, he unmoored his daughters who had learned so much about God through his actions and words. Serene asked him one last time as she neared the end of this book to speak on how God is working in his life now, this is their conversation: Joe: “As for formal theology it’s just not on the surface of my mind anymore”: So what can you say Serene asks?” We find our ultimate destiny in God, daughter dear I still know that”…Serene: Would you call that ultimate destiny Love?: Joe: Well yes, God is love, but not love as we know it. God’s love is God’s. Serene grimaced at his mention of Love as we know it thinking of the love he had thought he had known through his wife. He went on when she asked if God’s love was biggest. “Not quite. Biggest is an adjective, still suggests that God’s love can be defined by human metrics of size and shape, It also suggests God is an entity that has attributes. Like people do . But God isn’t one more person or entity among others. God is God. Existing beyond all words and ideas we pile on God-even beyond the word Existing. Look at all the different images and theories of God we’ve conjured up over time. These Gods always look like us, whoever we may be. It’s horrible to see wrongs perpetrated by people who project their own image onto God and turn them into mini gods in the process. Even the good ones. And come on Serene, honestly, we don’t even fully know ourselves. Most of the time, we are utter fools. Products of the lies of our upbringing. I’m living proof of those Lies! How can we, fools that we are, pretend to know ultimate reality?” And so, I will add, God knowing this allows us to choose our own kings. Allows us to figure out our own path. We often do it poorly. We choose leaders that harm more than nurture our communities. But we also do it well at times. When we form alliances and reach out to those in our community who need to be fed not with doctrines and laws but with real spiritual and actual food for the body and soul. When we change actual systemic problems that are so harmful to both the oppressed and the oppressor. Sometimes, we like Mark’s community can’t even distinguish Jesus presence from evil. We don’t accept that Jesus can be in certain places in this world. There is no place that the presence of the Holy Spirit cannot be found. I can’t tell you how we know the presence of the Holy Spirit in every instance. But I do know that it often goes beyond our capacity for words, for love, for forgiveness and is all encompassing and permeating. We know the Holy Spirit is among us when there is love bigger than any words for love, when there is acceptance beyond all human barriers, and when our feelings of bitterness, grief and hard heartedness have been lifted. So what does this have to do with authority you might ask? What does it have to do with kings and elected officials? We as believers and followers of the Holy Spirit among us must use the expansiveness and love of God to guide us in all our choices. Jesus continuously challenges us to see that our own family extends beyond our blood relatives, extends beyond our racial divides, extends beyond political divides. Society and its leaders has never been the best guide and even the institution of the church has many limitations in discernment. Serene Jones says: This premise, the de-objectification of every human being, even the romantically beloved, turns into a divine beholding of one another and life. We share this air, this planet, this life and cherish one another for the sharing.” This is deep stuff and yet it takes us beyond ourselves; beyond our feelings and into a God who loves us, all of us, beyond anything we can fathom. I will end by quoting from Karl Barth on the nature of God: “God, the pure limit and pure beginning of all that we are, have, and do, standing over in infinite qualitative difference to us and all that is human, nowhere and never identical with that which we call God, experience, surmise, and pray to as God, the unconditioned Halt as opposed to all human rest, the yes in our no and the no in our yes, the first and last and as such unknown, but nowhere and never a magnitude amongst others in the medium know to us…that is the living God.”