

The Lord Looks at the Heart

I Samuel 16:1-13

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God sent Samuel to anoint a new king for Israel. The first king Samuel appointed, the king named Saul, turned out to be a bust. So God sent Samuel to Bethlehem to find a man named Jesse. God said to Samuel, "I have chosen one of Jesse's sons to be king." This immediately raised a red flag for Samuel. Even though Saul had been a bust as king, he was still around, and he was still pretty powerful. So much so that Samuel said to God, "If Saul hears about this, he will kill me." So God sends Samuel under the guise that he is only going to make a sacrifice. He is to invite Jesse to the sacrifice and when Jesse arrives, God will point out which of Jesse's sons will be the new king.

Under cover, and under threat from the sitting king, Samuel arrives in Bethlehem and is soon joined on the scene by Jesse and his sons. Apparently they are a pretty good looking crew. Samuel's eye is drawn to Eliab. Eliab was the firstborn son of Jesse. He was the oldest. You get the impression he might have been the tallest, maybe the strongest. We don't know exactly why but Samuel sees Eliab, the oldest of Jesse's sons, and begins to think maybe God has a pretty good plan after all. When Samuel sees Eliab he thinks to himself, "Surely the Lord's anointed stands here before the Lord." But God says, "Not so fast. He's not the one."

Abinadab comes up. He's second oldest. God says not this one. Shammah steps forward. He's third in line. God says nope. All seven of Jesse's sons come up, show their wares, and each one gets rejected. When there is no one else in line, and all the seven sons have been rejected, Samuel is not quite sure what to do. He was sent to anoint a king from the sons of Jesse and all seven have been rejected. So Samuel asks Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?"

And it turns out Jesse has been holding back. He's got a big, strapping, handsome, athletic, intellectual, artistic, creative, combative, strong but sensitive, brave and bold son that would be just perfect for the job of king. Jesse and his seven other sons pair up and form a tunnel and Jesse shouts out, "Now Samuel, I give you the cream of the crop, the golden child, the best, the brightest, the biggest and the baddest of all my boys. I give you David." As his brothers cheer David

races through the tunnel and bursts out with a bang, right there in front of Samuel, who is bowled over at God's choice for a king.

It doesn't turn out quite that way. In fact, when Samuel asks Jesse if these are all his sons, Jesse almost apologetically says, "There is still the youngest." But Jesse didn't even think to bring him to the anointing party. He left the youngest out tending sheep. Jesse seemed to think one of the seven older ones, and maybe any of the seven older ones would do just fine as king. Why bring David? What do you think the older brothers did when they sent for David? Can you imagine the snickering and rolling of eyes and muffled laughter as the little squirt that is their youngest brother shows up and stands before Samuel? Can you imagine the lump in Samuel's throat as he moved down the line, from biggest to smallest and God said, no, no, no, no, no, no, no? When God finally reveals his choice, it is he youngest and undoubtedly the most unlikely of all the sons of Jesse. This story could be a disaster, except for one thing. God tells Samuel not to consider outward appearances. Instead, God says, "The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

For all those who have been judged by outward appearance, for all those who have fallen short on the grading curve, for all those who didn't get chosen for the team or who sat on the bench, for all those who didn't advance to the next round of dancing with the stars or gymnastics or the singing competition or the tryout for the school play or make first chair in the band...for all those whose application was rejected and who were passed over for promotion or gathered in a room and told your services are no longer needed...for all those who had a parent who for whatever reason said you weren't good enough or you were a disappointment or you would never amount to anything...for the ones whose hearts have been broken by a break up or divorce...and for all of us who have looked in the mirror and judged ourselves as not measuring up to whatever standard the world has set for us...who have wondered if our life matters or if our life makes a difference...this story of God choosing Jesse reveals an incredibly powerful and extremely and urgently important reality about God. God does not look at the things people look at. People look at outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.

The story of David captures the best of our fairy tales. It is Cinderella being transformed into a princess and the ugly duckling being revealed to be a lovely swan and little Wart drawing the sword out of the stone growing into the good hearted King named Arthur and it is the Beast who looks so frightening on the outside but inside is a beauty just waiting to be released. This littlest brother who

wasn't even invited to the anointing party turns out to be something else. When God's hand of blessing rests on you, the changes that come can be so wonderful.

Knowing that God does not look at outward appearance, this little guy David will stand up against Goliath, a giant of an adversary. The outward appearance of Goliath caused every Israelite soldier to shake with fear. Goliath of Gath stood at a height of six cubits and a span. That is nine feet and nine inches of muscle and mass rising up nearly as tall as a basketball hoop. He had a bronze helmet on his head and wore a coat of scale armor of bronze weighing something in the order of 125 pounds. He swung it around like it was lightweight plastic. He sported a bronze javelin and a spear shaft weighing fifteen pounds. To top it all off he even had a military assistant to aid his cause...as if he needed any help. But David understood that God did not look at outward appearances. David stood up to Goliath. He stood up not with weapons and shields and swords and spears. No. David stood up with a shepherd's pouch filled with five smooth stones, his shepherd's staff, and a sling. By all outward appearances...who would you put your money on in this battle between David and Goliath?

What is revealed in the life of David is the wonderful ability of God to see the heart, to look beyond outward appearances, and to enable a person to achieve their full potential, a potential that others who judge by outward appearances would never have guessed existed. This little guy who was at the end of the lineup of his brothers turned out to be a gifted musician, playing his harp in ways that comforted the troubled. He was a poet, writing some of the most beautiful and heartfelt songs, many of which occupy a place in the book of Psalms. David was an outstanding leader who could rally his troops around him, lead them in battle, and organize an efficient and effective kingdom. Perhaps it was his experience of nearly being looked over, of being at the end of the line, of being the least in terms of appearances, but David had an ability to show concern for others that was genuine and inspiring.

During the time of David's reign one of the distressing realities was that the Ark of the Covenant had been captured, and although it was back in the hands of the Israelites it was not back in the place of worship. This was a big deal. The Ark of the Covenant had been with Israel through that long journey in the wilderness as Moses led the people. It held the Ten Commandments and some of the sacred manna that was the daily bread for forty years. David brought the Ark home, and it was a joyous day. There was singing and dancing and celebration. David did something on that day that recognized the common person, the everyday and ordinary people of God, the ones who by outward appearance were just normal,

run of the mill Israelites. On that day of celebration David gave a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and a cake of raisins to each person in the whole crowd of Israelites. He didn't recognize the leaders. He didn't bestow favor on the elites. He didn't disburse a blessing on the wealthy. He gave a loaf of bread, a cake of dates and cake of raisins to each person in the whole crowd. It was a sign and a symbol that the king of Israel cared about each one, from the greatest to the least, because he understood God was a God who didn't judge by outward appearances. Later he would show kindness to one of the previous king's descendants who had a physical disability. David would have more than his share of failures and times when he behaved poorly and times his actions were in direct rebellion against the commands of God. But at his best, David did not judge by outward appearances.

Instead of being relegated to the pages of the Old Testament, the story of David seems to become the story of Jesus. Of course there is the similarity where Jesus is judged by his outer appearance, born as a helpless infant, criticized because he was the son of Joseph, dismissed because he came from Nazareth, and if we believe the prophecy from Isaiah Jesus had no stately form or majesty that we should be attracted to him. But even more than how Jesus was received by others, the idea that God looks at the heart becomes the very foundation of the life changing ministry of Jesus. Those who were judged by their outer appearance, judged and found wanting, judged and pushed to the margins of life, judged and excluded, judged and leading lives of quiet desperation, those ones who had been judged by outer appearances found a friend in Jesus.

If you lined up humanity, where would you put the lepers, the lame, the deaf, the mute, the blind, the sinners, the outcasts, the sick, the hurting, the weak, and the vulnerable? They usually end up at the end of the line. Sometimes they are at the end of line because when the line was formed they had no strength or ability to get to the front. Others were faster, stronger, and more privileged. They had the right connections, so they got to the front. Sometimes their rejection was purposeful, as when people are excluded for any variety of reasons that are racial, sexual, economic, ethnic, gender related, or any other reason humans choose to segregate and isolate. The amazing thing about Jesus is that it is almost as if he makes a point of starting at the end of the line. He comes to the least, the last, and the lost. He blesses them. He includes them. And you get the sense he sets them free to live life in a new way, to reach their full potential as sons and daughters of the living God.

As a congregation we have been reading the Gospel of Matthew during this season of Lent. Chapters eight and nine tell of Jesus healing the leper and the centurion's servant and Peter's mother-in-law and many others and ones who are demon-possessed and a paralytic and calling a tax-collector and making friends with the tax-collectors friends, raising a dead girl and healing a woman subject to many years of internal bleeding and giving sight to the blind and voice to the mute. He walks down the line of life and puts his hand on each and every person whose very appearance might have pushed others away and he sees something inside them that others don't see. At the conclusion of these wonderful stories of healing and wholeness Jesus looks out on the crowds and we are told he was filled with compassion. Indeed, looking out on precious children of God who have been judged by outward appearances, he has compassion because he looks at the heart.

Knowing that the ones Jesus chose were by and large the ones who came from the end of the line and whose outward appearance and attributes were not the things that drew his attention, the Apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth, "Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many of you were of noble birth." We who have been blessed to have been chosen by God know best that we were not chosen because of our outward appearance or any of the things the world judges by. We have stood in line with David and instead of being rejected because we didn't bring anything to the table, we have been selected. We have been elected. We have been chosen. We have been chosen by the God who looks at the heart.

When Paul reminds the Corinthians that when they were called they represented what he refers to as the lowly things of this world and the despised things...when he begins his first letter to the Corinthians with that reminder of how God chose us by looking beyond outward appearances, he is setting the stage for what he will write about in I Corinthians 12. In chapter 12 Paul tells the church, the individual members of the church, that they are not individuals at all. They are united through Jesus Christ. They are one through Jesus Christ. They are joined together in one body, the Body of Christ.

And now these many individuals that are joined together as one body are told not to judge one another by outward appearances. Earlier he said remember what you were when you were called. Remember now that as a church, as a community, each member of the body matters, each member is important, each member belongs, each member has something to offer. Sometimes what is offered is noticeable and impacts a large group and receives a lot of attention, and maybe

affirmation and accolades. And sometimes what is offered is less noticeable, less obvious, maybe even hidden, and behind the scenes. If we aren't careful we start lining up, the biggest and best in front, the smallest and the least in back, and we arrange things just like the world does, just like the world judges by outward appearance.

But if we hold on to this story of David, and especially to the God who does not judge by outward appearances, and if we look at the life of Jesus through that lens, and realize God chose Jesus to be our king, and as our King, as our Lord, as our God, he was so gracious and giving with his love, to all people, and especially to the weak, the vulnerable, the hurting, the broken, the excluded, the outcast, the ones way, way down at the end of the line...if we hold on to that, it just might be that we learn to live into the fullness of loving one another as members of the Body of Christ.