

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Pentecost 4 Year B

1 Sam 15:34-16:13; Ps 20; 2 Cor 5:6-10 (11-13) 14-17; Mk 4:26-34

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A couple of weeks ago as I was randomly flicking through TV channels, I chanced upon Britain's Got Talent—just in time to see a tall skinny weedy and balding guy in his 30s head out onto the stage. You could just feel the atmosphere in the auditorium and sense the attitude of “Here come’s another one.” He had a few words with the judges who looked as though they were getting ready to dismiss him with their buzzers. That all changed, however, when the music started and he sang one of the most beautiful renditions of the classic romantic song, *Maria*, that they had probably heard in a very long time. By the end of the short performance, everyone, including the judges, were on their feet, applauding.

And we’ve seen this happen a number of times. Who remembers Susan Boyle and Paul Potts. Susan Boyle came out looking like she had just finished the housework and Paul Potts looked like a telephone salesman—which, of course, he was. Both went on to stardom.

We’re all familiar with the old adages: “Appearances can be deceiving; never judge a book by its cover; looks are only skin deep.” I’m sure that most, if not all of you here today have experienced—either negatively or positively—the truth of these adages.

It’s easy to judge people based on their appearance. It’s easy to judge circumstances by how they appear on the outside. It’s easy to jump to all kinds of conclusions by what we see with our eyes. We do it all the time. The reality is, however, when we judge by appearances, we often get things wrong.

Last week we heard how the people of Israel, had come to the prophet Samuel and demanded that they have a king. They wanted to be like the other nations. Samuel warned them what would happen. The security that came with the appointment of a king would bring with it the heavy yoke of taxation on their lands and livestock and the conscription of young men into the king’s service. But in the end, the people got what they wanted. So, assured and led by God, Samuel anointed Saul as King over Israel.

But as foreshadowed by Samuel’s concerns, Saul’s reign was a little bumpy. He did not prove to be a good ruler. Saul was a reluctant leader at first but once he got a taste for power, it kind of went to his head and next thing you knew, Saul was just pretentious enough to start disobeying the commands of God.

So, God asked Samuel to go and anoint a new king over Israel. God knew whom he has his eye on and so sends Samuel off to Bethlehem—a modest place to find a king—to the clan of a shepherd named Jesse. Now, this was not an assignment that Samuel would have relished. It shouldn't even have been necessary. The whole point of monarchies is to have a hereditary ruler. The oldest son was supposed to succeed his father as king. But God had other plans.

The other and perhaps bigger problem with Samuel anointing a new king, was that Saul, who was now king, would not exactly be thrilled with the idea. The relationship between Saul and Samuel was already a little stretched by this time. There had been some conflict, and while Samuel as prophet had not hesitated to confront Saul with his sin, to go as far as anointing a new king would be seen as treason and would certainly put his life in danger. Samuel rightfully feared for his life.

But, Samuel being an obedient servant, heads off. In spite of the danger, he is committed to serving God and knows it needs to be done. I am sure that some of us can relate to that. In our occupations, as parents, in our family life, with friends, there are times we have to face those difficult tasks that we don't enjoy, but know need to be done.

So, to help Samuel achieve his task, God came up with a ruse to cover Samuel's tracks. Samuel would go to Bethlehem under the pretence of inviting Jesse and his sons to join him in offering a sacrifice of some kind. He tried to do this on the quiet, but word got around and as he approached the city, the city elders headed out to meet him—with some amount of fear and trepidation. They didn't fear Samuel himself so much as the possibility that Samuel was bringing his controversy with Saul into their city. What was to follow? Would there be bloodshed? Would the king draft their young men into military service, or commandeer their fields and flocks?

Samuel assures them that he comes in peace, and that there is no cause for alarm—he is there to offer a sacrifice to God—which was the truth—but not quite the whole truth. He then tells the elders that they are welcome to come and join in, although the rest of the story makes it sound as though none of the elders actually took Samuel up on his invitation.

Samuel and Jesse and Jesse's sons purify themselves for the sacrifice—they go through ritual washings to be prepared for the worship of God—and then get on with the main event. Samuel asks Jesse to bring his sons forward.

The first son that Samuel sees is Eliab. He was big and strong and good-looking—he looked like a king. “Surely, this is the one,” thought Samuel. But it wasn’t Eliab. The Lord said to Samuel, “Mortals see only appearances but God sees the heart.” Then Abinadab walked before Samuel, but it was not him either. Jesse presented all seven of his sons to Samuel, but Samuel said, “Sorry, the Lord has not chosen any of these.”

Now while we can understand the focus on appearance—we understand it because we live in a culture that cares a great deal about appearance—there is another factor to consider. Serving as king meant being the political leader, the head of state, but it meant more than that. This was a time when the king would lead the army into battle. Being big and tall and strong wasn’t just about looking the part, it was also about doing the job.

Samuel had now met Jesse’s seven sons—all strong, healthy lads. At this point, Samuel may have wondered if he got the message right. Here he had been nervous about it and as it turned out, he wasn’t going to anoint a new king anyway. Maybe he had the wrong family, maybe it was supposed to be Jesse in Jericho—you know—the *other* Jesse. But then he went on and asked, “I don’t suppose you have any other sons, do you?” (Just stabbing in the dark here.)

As luck would have it, there was one more son, David, the youngest, who was watching the sheep. David was just a kid, certainly not what you would think of as king material. But Samuel said, “Nobody sits down till David gets here.” David arrived, and the Lord said to Samuel, “Rise and anoint him; this is the man.” Samuel took the oil and anointed him, and the scripture says, “The spirit of the Lord was with him from that day onwards.”

Of all the sons, David was the least expected—just a shepherd boy. The leading prophet of the nation had come to visit—it would be hard to overstate how important an occasion this was—and David wasn’t even part of the gathering. Well, someone had to look after the sheep—and he was the youngest—just a small, weedy kid, really.

What kind of choice was this? David was young. He had no experience. He was untried. He had never led an army, never even served in an army. He had never been on a diplomatic trip, had no experience in negotiation, and had no idea what was involved in running a kingdom.

The key to God’s choice, however, is found in verse 7: “for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

The Lord sees the heart. Now, the really ironic thing about this story is the description of David. The text says he was “handsome, with ruddy cheeks and bright eyes.” Apparently, he was not as good-looking as Eliab or some of his other brothers, but it is interesting that this description is included. It almost illustrates the point. While “the Lord sees the heart,” you get the feeling that in telling the story, years later, the writer couldn’t help but mention that King David was a good-looking guy even as a youngster. The point to note here, however, is that his looks had no bearing on why God chose David.

When we look at other people, what do we see? Do we see appearances, or do we see the heart? We live in a culture that is in many ways obsessed with appearance. It’s all about what you can see. And it’s very easy to make judgments about others and judgments about what is of value based solely on appearance.

There is far more to all of us than what might be gathered based on our outward appearance. Now, this is not to say that when choosing a leader, criteria don’t matter. The fact is, criteria can be very helpful. Resumes are useful. Of course you look at track record. But at some point, the criteria are not really the main thing. The resume is not the main thing. Appearances are not the main thing. How much more so is that true in God’s kingdom.

Now, we should note that David wasn’t perfect. His marriages were problematic. His children squabbled and even murdered each other—as they do. But, unlike Saul, God never withdrew his spirit from David.

Despite his faults, however, we are told by the apostle Paul that David was “a man after [God’s] own heart.” According to Paul God rejected Saul and replaced him with David, because “in his testimony about him he said, ‘I have found David, son of Jesse, to be a man after my heart, who will carry out all my wishes.’” Paul pointed to David, because he wanted to show that Jesus was David’s rightful heir, the promised Saviour of Israel (Acts 13:21-23). Jesus also had God’s heart within him.

God does not always choose the tall, strong person who looks like a model. God had called Samuel as a child. And now, God used Samuel to call another unlikely leader.

Sometimes it’s the unqualified, the inexperienced, the unlikely, the one nobody would expect. Sometimes that is the person God calls. Sometimes God calls the youngest son of a small-town shepherd. And sometimes, the unlikely person that God calls is you.

To him be all the glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.