

Appearances Can Deceive

I Samuel 16:6-13
II Corinthians 5:6-10

“We are all broken. Part of the job of a counselor is to help people identify how they are broken. Part of the challenge of counseling is not to let one's own specific form of brokenness get in the way of doing the job.” So wrote Dr. Sandra Brown in the introduction to an article entitled Pastoral Care of Single Persons published in the Journal of Pastoral Care. We all try to present a brave face to the world. When someone asks, “How are you?” almost inevitably we answer, “Fine!” Behind the facade, however, we may very well be hiding brokenness.

In my clinical training with Dr. Brown I learned the truth of her axiom. One family entered a counseling session calmly. (Dr. Brown had gotten their permission for me to sit in. I was only to observe.) I observed her open with two gentle, yet on-point questions based on previous sessions with them. As the mother tried to answer the second one without giving away too much, the young teen daughter suddenly exploded, “Mom! You **know** that's b.s.!” (Except, of course, she spoke the words, not the initials.) In an instant all three of them were yelling. The rest of the hour we heard impassioned talk about the mom's alcoholism; the dad's temper; the daughter's sexual activities. The family ended the session without any sort of resolution at all. When they left the tension in the room was almost a physical entity, it was so powerful.

Dr. Brown turned to me and said, “That went really well!” I thought she was being sarcastic, but I saw she meant it. Seeing my confusion, she said essentially the first half of what she wrote in that journal article: “We are all broken. Part of your job as a counselor is to help people identify how they are broken.” She had given a great deal of thought to those two questions. She wanted to lead the family into being honest with her and with each other, to stop hiding behind their brave faces. Since that was her goal she could justifiably say it did go well.

Appearances *can* deceive. The Prophet Samuel thought he had his man. Sent by God secretly to anoint a new king, Samuel sought out the family of Jesse of Bethlehem. There, the Lord would reveal which of Jesse's seven sons was eventually to become king in place of the now disgraced Saul. Samuel's eye first landed on Eliab, the eldest son. But the Lord told him not so fast, “for the Lord sees not as humanity sees; for humanity looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” An intern at PCMag asked Bill Gates how he would advise young entrepreneurs to make the next big fortune. Gates replied, “If anybody ever develops an app that can tell you the true character of all those faces you see on a dating site, they'll become exceedingly rich.” (Of course, given what we have learned about Gates in his very public separation from his wife, he may have had himself in mind—not as the app developer but as the guy the app exposes.)

The next five sons to stand before Samuel received the same rejection. Finally Jesse fetched his youngest, who had the job of tending the sheep. Ironically, the

author of I Samuel gives us an admiring physical description of David. He was “ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome.” The Lord's app told Samuel this was the one to anoint. The author does not tell us what it was about his character, his inner quality, that qualified him to become the next king. God simply gave Samuel the word. Samuel anointed David and went home. And “the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.” Saul had formerly had that Spirit. The very next verse tells us the Lord had taken it from him and given it to David. Now the young lad had the encouragement and the guidance the Spirit gives.

Appearances can deceive. In English, appearance has two seemingly disparate meanings. It can mean how someone or something looks (“His appearance was ruddy”), and it can mean to stand before another (“She had to appear in court.”) The Apostle Paul used the word in the latter fashion in our passage from II Corinthians. He tells us we must all someday “appear before the judgment seat of Christ.” But before we deal with this culmination of our passage, we need to look at the dualities in it. Paul wrote of home vs. away, faith vs. sight, good vs. evil. These verses continue a lengthy wrestling match Paul had conducted with himself. While we live in this world we cannot live with God. We sin, yet we have hope that Christ's death on the cross gives us the opportunity to live with God. While we live we must try to please God. That is, while keeping the law of God does not save us, (Christ saves us), that same law defines good and evil and we must do our best to do good.

Commentator Murray Harris helpfully divides our verses into two parts. The first

half tells us of our destiny with Christ; the second, of our accountability to Christ. We can have hope, Paul tells us, because by faith we believe there is a God and we have a home prepared for us with that God. This is our destiny: that by the grace of God we sinners have the opportunity to experience life with God. Ah, but here comes the second half. We remain accountable. God has given us the ability to discern good from evil. While we live in this world we must try to know and to do good.

Jesus made this point repeatedly. He praised a poor widow for making an offering with the only coin she had. He told parables extolling caring for outcasts. As we have just become a Matthew 25 church let us remember the point of his teaching in that chapter is that when we minister to “the least”, to the poor, the oppressed, the broken, we minister to Jesus himself. Paul agonized over how to understand the place of God's law in the Christian life. He wrote more about it than any other topic. Here in II Corinthians, at least, he offered at least one clear thought about it: Christ will judge us based on our behavior. That judgment will come back with the verdict “not guilty”, but only by the grace of God, through the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross. Meanwhile, Paul believes, we **will** be judged, we **will** be held accountable.

Only masochists like to be held accountable. But whether or not we like it, we must agree with the Apostle Paul that the scriptures (for him just the Old Testament, but for us the New as well) tell us God will hold us accountable for our conduct as followers of Jesus. Yet we have hope. For though as sinners we will be found guilty, the grace of God pardons us. So we do good not to be found not guilty, but to give

thanks to God for God's mercy. One excellent way to do good—and we probably do not talk enough about this—is to care for each others' spirits. Specifically, we ought to provide care for the mental and emotional health of our families, our brothers and sisters in the church, and for the least, who surround us in Terre Haute.

I first heard of author John Green from our son, who attended the same college as he but a few years later. I have never read his novels, which are wildly popular among tweens and teens. Several have been made into movies. I have, though, listened to his insightful, engaging podcast, The Anthropocene Reviewed. (We live in the Anthropocene Era, the time of human dominance of the planet.) In this podcast Greene uses the five-star system to rank all sorts of things from dogs (5 stars), to cholera (1), to the Dewey Decimal System, to Indianapolis (where he lives), to the show tune You'll Never Walk Alone. Greene's beautiful writing never fails to delight. He has just released the book The Anthropocene Reviewed. I give it five stars.

John Green has also always been honest about his own mental and spiritual health. Since adolescence he has struggled with depression and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. After graduating from Kenyon College he entered the University of Chicago's divinity school. He did his clinical pastoral care training at a children's hospital. The suffering and tragedy he witnessed there threw him into a faith crisis. “How could a loving God even contemplate, let alone permit, such crushing affliction?” he wrote in the introduction to his new book. He left seminary. But he did not leave behind the resources of pastoral care. He entered counseling and turned to a

discipline of prayer and meditation. In a stand-alone episode of his podcast he explains that this became a process, not an event, an ongoing behavior that has sustained him now for over twenty years.

In an interview Green gave the New York Times, published this week, he concluded with these words, “(In this book) I also wanted to articulate some of the ways I’ve worked my way back toward hope over the last few years. I think hope is the correct response to consciousness.” We are conscious. We are alive. Though we are all broken in some way, and some of us are so broken we can barely get up in the morning, we have hope. Brilliant philosophers have certainly concluded differently, that life is without meaning and therefore hopeless. But others (St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Kierkegaard, and in the last century Alfred North Whitehead) have held onto their hope through intellectual and spiritual effort. Brilliant authors have told us nothing matters. But others (Dafoe, Tolstoy, the contemporary British author Karen Armstrong—I highly recommend her—and yes, John Green) have found moving ways to wrestle with the demons that attack our mental and spiritual health. In the end, they retained their faith. They are believers seeking healing and hope.

Take care of others’ mental and spiritual health. Tend to your own. Think, or read, or pray, or whatever works for you. It is one of the best of the good works to which the Apostle Paul calls us. For we will be held accountable. Attempting this good work will look good on our records. And it nurtures the hope we so deeply, deeply need.