

The Least Likely

I Samuel 15:34-16:13

II Corinthians 5:6-10

Let us review the characters in the story we just read from I Samuel. Samuel himself was a charismatic prophet called by God from boyhood. He had apprenticed under another highly-respected prophet, Eli. Samuel had heard the voice of the Lord telling him to accept the Israelites' demand for a king, and had walked an appreciable distance to pour oil on the head of Saul, marking him as the One whom God had chosen to become Israel's first king. Saul had seemed a likely candidate. The Bible tells us he was tall and handsome and physically strong. Humanity seems to fall for this fallacy over and over again. Appearances can deceive. For every George Washington (6'3", and though he had bad teeth, so did everybody else), there is at least one example of a George Custer (6'0" with flowing blonde hair). For every Helen of Troy (reputed to be a great beauty of the ancient world and a savvy political leader), there is at least one (pick your favorite example of a celebrity who misuses her fame).

The first point of this sermon is that we so often make the mistake of judging by appearances. One way of reading this story is that the Lord did, too, in the case of Saul. But the plot thickens. In our previous two weeks we have seen how God reacted to the Israelites' insistent demands for a king. The Lord had insisted that they needed no king; the Lord would bless and protect them. But they did not relent.

Finally, God told Samuel, in essence, “Okay, let’s give them what they want. Let them have a human king. He will abuse his power. He will welcome unnecessary wars. Your sons will die. I am warning you.” Samuel relayed this bleak message to the people, who ignored it. They still wanted a king. They got one in Saul. He did exactly what the Lord had predicted. A new era of defeat for the Israelites ensued. They lost their young men and territory. We might want to consider our own faith in kings and presidents as we read this saga.

Traditionally, scholars have interpreted this story as God teaching the people an important lesson. “Trust me,” is the message. “Or put your trust in a king. At your peril.” But now the plot takes a turn. The Lord sends Samuel to anoint the next king. After an objection based on safety, “How can I go? If Saul hears of it he will kill me.” (Because no king accepts the designation of his successor.) Samuel takes his “horn of oil” and a heifer and goes to Bethlehem. We will get to the oil in a moment. The heifer is a cow that has not yet given birth to a calf. That makes her young, fertile and of tremendous value. She can produce several years’ worth of calves who can be sold, or butchered for meat, or bred to produce generations of livestock. The Lord has given Samuel perfect cover. If Saul should question why Samuel has gone to Bethlehem, taking a heifer to sacrifice is too costly not to be true.

Except it was not true. Samuel had gone to Bethlehem to anoint the king who would take Saul’s place. But one more twist awaited. And it takes us back to appearances. The Lord has sent Samuel specifically to find Jesse. We can read the

text to state that he has either eight, or eleven sons. Whichever is the case, when Samuel explains why he has come, Jesse naturally starts with the eldest, Eliah. He “passes before” Samuel and impresses him greatly. Samuel believes he must be the anointed one, meant to become king. But he has judged Eliah with the same flawed standard he had mistakenly used with Saul. They are tall, strong, good-looking. Yet the Lord communicates very clearly he is *not* the one. For, the Lord says, he looks not on outward, but inward appearances.

Jesse works his way down the age-range through all of those sons of his present before Samuel. The Lord “rejects” them all. Samuel asks whether Jesse has any more sons. Just one, Jesse replies, but he is the youngest and is out in the fields, keeping the sheep. By this time and in this part of Central Israel, very few dangers threaten sheep. Almost all the wild predators have been eradicated. Stock owners cooperate, creating more security for all. And sheep are easy to lead. Thus, mere boys often have the job of watching them. We may think of David, that youngest son of Jesse, as being as little as eight or ten years old. Though the text tells us, “He (is) ruddy, (has) beautiful eyes and (is) handsome,” he must also possess those inner characteristics the Lord has told Samuel he wants in the next king. Samuel anoints David and walks away. As of this moment David has not become king. But, the story makes clear, someday he will be.

The second point of this sermon is that even the least likely among us can serve the Lord. Even children. Even those who fear they have grown too old and feeble.

Even those who never saw anything in themselves they thought the Lord might use. The former Pastor here, David Perkins, had a younger brother, Philip. Philip had a terrible kidney disease. It distorted his body and left him in intense pain. We know this because their mother was the organist at the church I served in suburban St. Louis. His condition frustrated Philip greatly. He was smart and wanted to do something, *anything*, to help others.

Several members of the Cardinals baseball team belonged to the church. One day right fielder Andy van Slyke handed me two tickets right behind home plate. He had one condition for their use: at least one of them had to go to somebody who otherwise would not get to go to a ballgame. I immediately thought of Philip. He was happy to use one of the tickets. I used the other so I could help him with his wheelchair. At least that's how I justified using the other ticket myself. Like most St. Louisans, Philip was an avid Cardinals fan. He enjoyed the game. During the late innings he said, "I wonder if Mr. van Slyke and the other players would mind if I asked for more tickets every now and then. I am thinking of some others in our church who would like this and I know I can pick up the phone to make all the arrangements." And that is exactly what happened. For several years, until Philip could no longer even use the telephone, Cards games became his ministry. If he could do it, so can we.

Philip Perkins lived trapped in a horribly painful, disfigured body. He has long since died, which may be a mercy actually. In our passage from his letters to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul speaks of being "in the body". He means living this life.

When he writes “we would rather be *out* of the body” he means we would rather have died and gone to live with Christ. Most of us really prefer this life. Paul is almost certainly sincere when he expresses his preference for the life he believes is to come. Yet we can in fact “be of good courage”, as he writes, when he have faith in the goodness and mercy of God.

Paul does add an ominous note at the conclusion of this passage. He writes, “we must all appear at the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according what (they) have done in the body.” Paul believes some will be eternally condemned. He trusts *he* will not be, because he has faith in the promises of God and has lived his life in obedience to God's law. The point of this passage—and the third point of this sermon—is we must try our best to live obediently *inside and out*. Our thoughts and our attitudes (inner characteristics) matter as much as our (outer) behavior. The mayor of a small town in Northern Michigan ate breakfast most weekdays at a local cafe. Anybody could join him at his table, and quite a few did. A friend invited me to eat with the mayor. As it happened, a racist incident had occurred at a local high school just days before. Two groups of students, one white and the other members of a Native American tribe, had planned and conducted a massive brawl in the parking lot after classes. They had shouted nasty things at each other. Several of the whites brought scissors. They held down Native boys and cut off their pony tails, which are important symbols to Natives.

Somebody asked the mayor about the incident, which had happened in his

town. He said something like, “Well I have my thoughts but I don’t care to say them out loud.” Somebody else asked why not come out and say it, whatever it was. He said—and I am confident I have this quote exactly right—”Because if gets back to the tribe what I really think, I’ll never get elected again.” He thought he could *think* racist things and it would be okay as long as he did not *say* racist thoughts. The Bible thinks differently. God looks at our inner character. We need to take this very seriously.

To review Paul’s line of thinking, we find these ideas: We can live in “good courage” when we walk by faith and not by sight. When we trust in God’s goodness and God’s plan we can walk through this life—and enter the life to come—with our heads held by. Though judgment awaits each one of us, we can have confidence we will receive good, not evil, from Jesus Christ. Though he looks on our inner beings, and finds sin in each one of us, when we believe in him and try to obey his Word, we will live with him. Most all of us have suffered the loss (to this life) of loved ones. Does this message not bring us hope and peace in our hearts?

A hospitalized man recently said, “I’m tired.” And he ripped all his IV lines out of his arms. A nurse came in later and learned what he had done. The nurse called his wife, who arrived in his room at around four in the morning. Naturally, she wanted to know why he had done it. “I am ready to see my mom and dad,” he answered, “and besides, this body of mine is no use any more.” He is *ready*. He believes. His family have taken solace from his inner nature, his faith and his hope. They all agree the time has come for him to go. They are at peace. We can be, too.