

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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October 22, 2017

I Samuel 16:1-13

The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king." But Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears about it, he will kill me." The LORD said, "Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.' Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what to do. You are to anoint for me the one I indicate." Samuel did what the LORD said. When he arrived at Bethlehem, the elders of the town trembled when they met him. They asked, "Do you come in peace?" Samuel replied, "Yes, in peace; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves and come to the sacrifice with me." Then he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed stands here before the LORD." But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." Then Jesse called Abinadab and had him pass in front of Samuel. But Samuel said, "The LORD has not chosen this one either." Jesse then had Shammah pass by, but Samuel said, "Nor has the LORD chosen this one." Jesse had seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, "The LORD has not chosen these." So he asked Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?" "There is still the youngest," Jesse answered. "He is tending the sheep." Samuel said, "Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives." So he sent for him and had him brought in. He was glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features. Then the LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; this is the one." So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David. Samuel then went to Ramah.

Beautiful Eyes

Some years ago a woman took the stage for a popular TV show called "Britains Got Talent". She looked like anybody's grandmother - very ordinary looking, some might say dowdy. But when she opened her mouth to sing -- "I Dreamed a Dream" from the musical Les Mis -- Susan Boyle had such a gift, and the camera panned the judges panel, their mouths agap.

If you are a baseball fan, you might be watching the series between the Houston Astros and the New York Yankees which wrapped up last night with a Houston win. There is on the Astros team a player from Venezuela named Jose Altuve, who comes in at maybe five foot five inches, the shortest player in professional baseball. He is tiny, but powerful, and much feared at the plate. He's in the running for Most Valuable Player against a far more physically commanding New York Yankees player named Aaron Judge.

The story of David and his selection as king remind me of Susan Boyle and Jose Altuve for each in their own way is a surprise, not what we'd have expected and it brings up front and center, this story does, first that God kind of loves surprises and second that God is able to do what is so rare: namely get beyond appearances to the heart of a person.

So it's time for a new king in Israel. Saul is king, but he's troubled, he's no longer showing much concern for following in God's ways. Again God intervenes. It is not right for the people to be led by someone who does not have their interest at heart. So in a well thought out plan, a plan that Saul will not detect, arrangements are made to find the next king, someone God has already "seen" someone Samuel must now locate.

So Jesse's sons are paraded by, one by one. There's Eliab, Samuel likes him. The oldest, the biggest, the strongest. (We might note here that in this instance, Samuel pretty much sees like the rest of us, and God chides Samuel not to be taken by appearance.) God does not see as we humans see. God looks on the heart. So Jesse calls up Abinadab. He's handsome, big and strong, but no, Samuel says, this isn't the one. Same with Shammah, "the Lord has not chosen this one" and in the end, all seven of the sons fail to get a thumbs up.

So Samuel says to Jesse Are all your sons here? Is this really all you've got? "Oh, that's right, there is another" Jesse says. "But I kind of forget about him most days. He is off tending sheep. It's gonna take a while to find him, and to be honest I'm not sure it's worth the time....he's kind of the runt of the litter." But Samuel insists. So Jesse sent and brought him in. "Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome" we are told and God says "this is the one, anoint him!" And Samuel does.

Wait a minute, I thought this story and this sermon were about appearances not mattering, not mattering like what's inside... so what's this about David being handsome -- where did *that* come from? We'll get to that shortly, but first let's pause to think about who in ancient times, or modern times for that matter, would love his story. Anyone who had ever felt ignored, slighted, passed over, Anyone without social or economic status, that's who. This is a "God loves the underdog" sort of story and the reason this story is funny, would have evoked wide grins, is that the older, stronger, better sons are passed over. The proud, the vain, the predictable winners are passed over in this beauty contest, and the one child everyone has kind of forgotten about is the very one chosen to be the next king of Israel. (*Feasting on the Word*, p. 101, James Mctyre)

The story is like Cinderella in so many ways, And it echoes what becomes a regular theme in the bible, namely God choosing the most unlikely, the ones people wouldn't often choose, to do God's work in the world. David hasn't been crowned, he hasn't tackled the mighty Goliath yet, but already for some he is a kind of hero – simply for being the last one anyone would think of to be king, and for being a person with a good heart.

Which leads us back to the question of why we hear that David was easy on the eyes when we thought that wasn't suppose to matter so much. Well, think about it. It may have been a narrators impulse, a narrators glee, a sort of "hooray for the little guy" sentiment that led to this comment. God was looking to the inside, to the heart, and David got the thumbs up, but as a side thing, the narrator just has to mention he was also a handsome guy, that there is a match between his inner beauty and his outer looks, his looks being like an added bonus. But here's the thing: the "beautiful eyes", which we might hear as further embellishment of David's attractiveness, might not have been that at all. In ancient times eyes were understood to be the portal to the soul. "Beautiful eyes" may be a comment about what you'd see reflected in David's eyes, namely his wisdom, his strength, namely that he had within inner resources for leadership. "Beautiful eyes" might also have been a comment on the way David looked upon the world, and upon others, knowing that it was all part of God's creation, or, that he saw things with a heart in tune with God's love and justice, a heart that saw things more the way God sees things than the way human beings see things.

This week someone gave me an article on Fred Rogers, Mister Rogers. It spoke of how Mister Rogers truly saw people, how he connected with people who others saw as "different." It mentioned, and I remember this, Mister Rogers talking with Jeff Erlinger, a little boy in a wheelchair, and how Rogers connected with him not by ignoring his disability but by actively asking him about his electric wheelchair and all the things the boy could do with it. Mister Rogers saw through and around the things that confuse or distract others. That may have been the kind of beautiful eyes that David had.

So what is this story trying to say to us today? What does it mean for us that when God runs a beauty pageant God looks most for what is going on inside? Well, it means for one that we ought to be focused there too. We ought always to be striving to see with beautiful eyes, with eyes that can see beyond outward appearances. It means we ought to be cultivating inner beauty, that we know that this is part of the church's distinct calling in the world.

This past Friday night Mike and I hooked up the Jed Clampett hillbilly trailer we own, much mocked by my brothers for its humble appearance, and drove to Cohasset to see about a Craigslist posting for a FREE leather chair and ottoman – something that seemed like it just might work for the new multipurpose slash youth room in the John Robinson Center. I bring this up not because of the chair, but because of the woman who gave it to us. She was so happy to give this furniture to the church, to know that young people would use it and enjoy it. She was happy as we stood out in her driveway to share some of her life (a second marriage, they have four teenagers living together under one roof) She was happy to share a bit about her work (for a nonprofit, securing housing for homeless people in the greater Boston area)

When we left there, Mike and I both agreed that this woman had a beautiful spirit. She radiated inner beauty; it was unmistakable. And it was good for me, because to be honest, I hadn't expected someone who was giving her life energy to the homeless to live in Cohasset, so see, I am not without my assumptions about how people are based on their zip codes!

Today we begin our stewardship season, a time for thinking about our church and what it means to us, a time for reflecting upon our financial commitment to the ministry we share together in this place. As we begin, I'd like to say that I wish each of you would have that same kind of joy in your spirit, joy in giving, when you come up on pledge Sunday and offer your gift. I'd like to think that our stewardship season would be a reflection of the inner beauty I know to be a part of this place – indeed, that we would grow in our inmost selves as we grow in our capacity to give.

I will have an opportunity on another Sunday to preach more of a stewardship sermon, but for today I will say this. I do know that one of the ways we cultivate beauty in ourselves is by being generous with what we have to give – our time, our talent, and our treasure – all three. I also know if God looks to the heart, that sometimes what is found there isn't all that wonderful – there is frustration, or anger, or resentment, there is fear and anxiety about the future. But we can do something about that, about our inmost emotions. Remember how when Jesus saw the widow in the temple, giving what little she had to give, how we praised her and said her giving was a beautiful thing? He found it remarkable that she, in her circumstances, was still helping to keep the temple going. He found it beautiful that she, in her circumstances, knew it was good for her soul to keep giving.

Last Sunday you all surprised me with a recognition of the twenty five year anniversary of my ordination. As part of that my husband Mike shared with you a little of my professional history, and you heard it....it wasn't always pretty. It was hard to have that one church in effect reject my leadership. So when I resigned, when it came time to go, I didn't intend to finish up my pledge for that year. The place had caused me no end of grief, nearly wrecked my health, why should I do that? But Mike (who confessed last week he wished that church would burn down) encouraged me to write that check, to pay my pledge in full. It was the hardest check to write, but in the end I was glad I did it. Though I did not know it at the time, that time—that trying time – was very much about what goes on inside and the kind of person I was going to be. Writing the check at that time was like saying God will go with me, and I will heal and you know, it worked like that too.

David may have had inner beauty there as a gift of God But most of us cultivate it moment by moment day by day step by step.

I'd like to close with words from an ancient Chinese proverb:

If there is light in the soul, there will be beauty in the person.

If there is beauty in the person, there will be harmony in the home.

If there is harmony in the home, there will be order in the nation.

If there is order in the nation, there will be peace in the world.

We might want those latter things --
Order in the nation, peace in the world,
We may want them very badly
but we have to begin here. (inner self)

And the way we open our souls to God
And the way we cultivate beauty
This matters
For when we do this
who we are on the inside will radiate out for all to see
and the ripples will spread wide
touching others, and yes, transforming life.

And when this happens God,
who has the most beautiful eyes of all,
applauds.

Amen.