

An Unlikely Choice

Fourth Sunday in Lent

1 Samuel 16:1-13

¹ The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons." ² Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the LORD said, "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.'" ³ Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you." ⁴ Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, "Do you come peaceably?" ⁵ He said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

⁶ When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD'S anointed is now before the LORD." ⁷ But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." ⁸ Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." ⁹ Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." ¹⁰ Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen any of these." ¹¹ Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." ¹² He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." ¹³ Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

Today we continue to look at God's call on people's lives. Two weeks ago we learned about Abram, a 70+ year-old, childless man who God called to move away from his home and family, and promised that obedience would make him a blessing to all nations. Last week we were introduced to a nameless, Samaritan woman who had a conversation with Jesus and became a witness and blessing to her community of God's saving acts in the world through Jesus. What was God thinking? We learn it doesn't matter our age, gender, marital status, religious upbringing, ethnicity, nationality or any other ways we divide ourselves, we can all accept God's call on our lives. Others may discount us and think we are an unlikely choice, but from our scripture we learn God sees us when others do not!

In 1 Samuel the Lord saw the distress and remembered the prayers of a maidservant, a barren wife named Hannah. As a consequence, she bore a son (1 Sam. 1:11, 20). This child,

Samuel, become a judge and prophet, but he called himself a seer, one who sees (1 Sam. 9:19).

Although he saw what some could not, even Samuel did not see as God sees. **Frederick Niedner**

We read in 1 Samuel 9:1-10:1 that God sent Samuel a man to anoint as Israel's first king. That very day a Benjaminite named Kish lost his herd of donkeys. Kish had a son named Saul who was very handsome and very, very tall. He stood head and shoulders above his peers. Saul was a bit of a Jewish giant! Kish instructed Saul to find the donkeys with the help of a boy. Along the way, Saul ran out of food and money and turned toward home before Kish began to worry about him. The boy produced some coin and persuaded Saul to continue to the village at the top of the hill, where a seer with a pretty good reputation for being right lived. Some young girls near a well directed them to Samuel. **Donald P. Olsen**

At God's direction, Samuel anointed Saul as Israel's first king, the tallest, most handsome man in all Israel (1 Sam. 9:2). When Samuel eventually presents Saul to the people as the new ruler whom they have requested, the prophet seems to assume that looks and stature suffice to make one a leader. "Do you see the one whom the LORD has chosen? There is no one like him among all the people," Samuel tells the assembly (1 Sam. 10:24). **Frederick Niedner**

Saul had early victories and did win the approval of his people; but he let the prerogatives of power go to his head. Kingly control emboldened Saul to assume authorities not ascribed to him in his anointing: his call and covenant with God and the people. At Gilgal (13:7-10) he claimed the priestly role offering sacrifices, an offence to God and irritation to Samuel. God then spoke to Samuel, lamenting the choice, "I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands" (15:11). Samuel chastised Saul, saying, "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obedience to the voice of the LORD? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is no less a sin than divination, and stubbornness is like iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king" (15:22-23). **Donald P. Olsen**

When the time comes for Samuel to anoint Saul's successor, God and Samuel see things very differently. Samuel was still grieving over God's rejection of Saul. But Samuel received his
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marching orders. God had identified yet another Benjaminite, whom God saw from the inside rather than the outside. Despite his grief over the results of his first anointing, his fear of being killed by Saul, and the apparent coup being planned—using sacrifice as cover for meeting with Jesse to anoint a new king—Samuel chose obedience and filled his horn with new oil. With a heifer in hand for cover, Samuel traveled to Bethlehem.

The circle of sacrifice began well. Jesse and his sons were sanctified by Samuel, and a parade of the potentials began. Samuel, however, still saw with his eyes. Eliab, the first presented, was tall and easy on the eye. Samuel began to think his work was done! God rejected Eliab, and the other six, because God was looking for a leader with heart. "The LORD does not regard appearances, but sees into the heart" (v. 7), God explains to the visually impaired prophet.

Heart was not the center of emotions for the ancients, although it was included. Heart was the center of one's being: emotion, intelligence, discernment, wisdom, commitment, and character were all elements of heart—perhaps what we call soul. The right combination was absent in these seven sons. Samuel asked for more. Surely, he had been obedient to God's command. God had said one was already chosen, so there must have been at least one more. Samuel would not close the circle until even the least likely was presented.

The ruddy youngest was fetched from the flock he was shepherding. The boy with beautiful eyes passed by them all and, even knowing that God was looking internally, Samuel could not help but comment on the lad's appearance. The beauty of one's heart, the loveliness of one's soul surpasses its physical container and is often seen through its portal to the world: one's eyes. David's name was finally used and he was anointed. Indeed, God has seen and chosen one whom Samuel cannot see at all, the shepherding son who had remained at some distance in the field. **Frederick Niedner**

All of us know something of how it feels to be excluded. Many have experienced the peculiar agony of being picked last for a sports team. The youngest, smallest, least coordinated are forced to watch as one by one the taller, stronger, more athletic specimens are chosen by the captains. A teenage girl knows the pain of being the one who is not asked to a dance. A boy whose birthday falls in the summer watches as each of his friends gets a driver's permit.

This Scripture passage reminds us the older, stronger, better sons may be passed over because God looks at the heart. The proud, the vain, the predictable winners may be passed over because God looks at the heart. In this case, the discounted, or even forgotten, is selected by God. "Do you have *any* other sons, Jesse?" "Well, um, there is one more, I think. I kind of forget about him most days." Hooray for David! Hooray for the little guy! Hooray for the ostracized, the outcast, the dismissed, the forgotten, the missing. Hooray for the unlikely choice!

This text, like God, sees and speaks to the heart. Anyone who has been the victim of a social pecking order carries scars that run deep. Human groups are not as patient as God. Any social organization is by its nature exclusive, but exclusion is particularly painful in the church. Many church people choose to self-exclude before a clique does it for them. So those who do not see well stop attending worship. Those who depend on walkers or wheelchairs sit near the back, arriving late and leaving early, so as not to be an obstacle to the crowd. Those whose skin color or sexuality is different go elsewhere, wherever that may be. After a while, the church forgets these people, not on purpose, not in malice. We just forget. But it is the ones we see as the unlikely choice that God uses in ministry. If you have been the forgetter or the forgotten, God calls you to ministry. God, at least, sees our hearts. This is a new day and there is a place and a task for each of us. God chooses the unlikely! Thanks be to God! **James Mctyre**

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