

“How God Sees”
Delivered Sunday, June 21, 2009
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Summer series on King David
1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

At the heart of our scripture reading there is a comparison made between the way we human beings see the virtue and promise in people and how God sees. Thinking about how human beings see other people, I was drawn to an editorial I clipped out and saved a while back which called into question the way our culture sees. The writer put it this way: "What is happening nowadays is the creation of a kind of celebrity community in which celebrity itself, not what led to it or what good use it may be put to, is a primary value and measure of worth." She noted how those in her own guild, journalists, as well as political leaders and just about everyone else in public life, is succumbing to the lure of celebrity, that condition of life someone so aptly characterized as being famous for... being famous. When we so easily fall for the image – the outward appearance, the charisma, the handsome good looks, this writer asked candidly, "Where did this novel theology come from?" (1)

Well, it may not be so new – this human inclination that draws us to physical beauty, or stature, or fame or some other manifestation of celebrity. The Bible is filled with stories about how people are first attracted to the outward appearance of things, and it is also full of stories about how God counters our usual patterns of determining value. No where it this more clearly laid out than in this scripture reading for today. "For the Lord does not see as mortals see;" God says to Samuel, "they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

When we began reading this Old Testament saga two weeks ago, the people of Israel had gone to great lengths to persuade the Lord that they needed a king to be like the other nations. Against all the warnings of the prophet Samuel, that God is the only king they needed, and that human rulers tend to abuse their power, the people had persisted and they won in the end. Samuel headed out to find them a king, and in an earlier chapter from First Samuel we are told – "There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than Saul; from his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people." Head and shoulders above everyone else. Good looking, too. But whatever first impressions Saul may have made, they did not pass the test of time. As a king, Saul was such a disappointment that the scripture says the Lord repented of choosing Saul. (It's kind of interesting to think about the Lord of all creation changing his mind like that...)

But anyway, poor old Samuel, who had talked Saul into being a king, had to tell him he was through. The parting could not have been sadder or more poignant. As Samuel turned to leave him, Saul reached out and grabbed the edge of the prophet's robe which tore off in his hand. Saul looked down at the piece of torn cloth, while Samuel said to him, "The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you." Saul was left -- alone, rejected, isolated, torn, and at the Lord's bidding, Samuel set out again to find a new king.

It's not long before Samuel was standing face to face with Eliab, the eldest and tallest of the sons of Jesse from the town of Bethlehem. Samuel looked at Eliab and said to himself, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." But God spoke over Samuel's inward thoughts and said, "The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance,

but the Lord looks on the heart." In other words -- beauty is only skin deep, Samuel. Don't fall for appearances again – you already made that mistake with Saul. You might think Eliab looks like a king, but I am looking at the inward person, and I do not see a king here, not in his heart." So the parade of Jesse's sons before old Samuel began: they flex their muscles, swing their swords, whatever kings-in-the-making might do to impress the prophet and judge. And with each of Jesse's sons, Samuel wondered if this one was to be the new king. But each time the Lord said, "Nope! Not that one!" And each one got smaller and younger, less kingly in appearance until there were none.

You have to wonder if Samuel was almost afraid to ask the question, "Oh, by the way, Jesse, you don't have any other sons do you. I mean, you don't have any more than these seven sons?" "There is one, but he is out watching the sheep. He's the youngest." "Well, bring him in for we can't eat supper until he gets here, anyway! And there he was. The new... king??? He was a mere shepherd boy! You can almost hear the old prophet sigh, "My Lord, are you sure? This one is the runt of the family. The caboose. He is nothing much to look at, ruddy in complexion, but he does have beautiful eyes! You need a commanding presence in a king. Here is just this boy. But the Lord has Samuel anoint young David as King.

In some ways it's the same old familiar biblical inversion – showing the way God always operates: casting down the high and mighty; lifting up the down and the lowly. God seems to have a definite bias for the small, the least, the last, the apparently insignificant. There was the younger Abel whose offering was preferred over the elder Cain's, Jacob the twin who bypassed first born Esau, Rachel beloved before Leah, little Joseph down in Egypt against all the older brothers, the prodigal son partying and squandering his life while the elder brother sulked. It must be God's way of reminding us that God is in control of human destiny, and that whatever customs and expectations we establish for the ordering of human society does not measure up to the way God sees.

Back to our celebrity-seeking world where outward appearances seem to reign supreme, this bible story reminds us that the way we look at things is somehow skewed in the mind of God. "The Lord looks on the heart," which means that God sees into our hearts. God sees promise and potential in us that might not be so readily apparent when we look in the mirror. God values something in each of us that God alone can see.

I think we all had a glimpse of this in the recent Susan Boyle phenomenon. How many of us pulled up on You-tube her performance on Britain's Got Talent or found ourselves glued to the television each time it was rebroadcast. Hers became the most-watched video in the world. The pundits readily began to spin the story to highlight this human instinct to stereo-type and demonstrate our culture's propensity toward ageism and prejudice brought on by physical appearance. And in so doing they participated in exactly what they were trying to point out. With all kinds of superficial values, they described her as frumpy, not-that-pretty, out-of-date, dowdy – and my personal favorite in this lineup of such descriptors – a church volunteer. And then we were all taken by surprise when she opened her mouth and belted out those first notes to "I Have a Dream." There was something unbelievably beautiful and worthy inside. Here's a theory about what caught us all by surprise. Suddenly we saw something not as mortals see; for "they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

Derek Maul, an author and freelance writer has written about our reaction to Susan Boyle saying: "I believe this is a story about redemption. The tale of Susan Boyle calls to us in the middle of our hopelessness and the void of meaning. Her three-minute clip reveals the implication of Gospel, presented in a way people have been longing to hear for a very long

time.” And then he says this: “As Christians we have been entrusted with this Good News: God created each human being on this earth with care and purpose. When Susan Boyle’s gift was uncovered people believed, even if only for a moment, that beauty and meaning and fulfillment and satisfaction are something other than what they have been repeatedly told; they believed that poetry lives inside all of us, and that the pointless games we all play are not the answer.” (2)

You know, most of us who are gathered here are not the kind of folks who in this day will get that fifteen minutes of prominence or fame we are supposedly due. Not one of us reaches into the ranks of "celebrity" on the American scene. But as members of this congregation what we have access to, weekly.... daily....is a glimpse into how God sees. As long as we go about doing the work of Jesus Christ, - tending the sheep, searching for the lost, keeping the poor fed and housed, loving one another, from time to time being really brave and trying to love an enemy, creating community among diverse people – as long as we remember that the way we mortals see is not the way God sees, we will experience this kind of redemption.

This anointing of David is case in point – he was the last of the lot, the end of the line, the youngest and the most unexpected, and yet, because of the way God sees, he will become the sprout out of the root of Jesse, from the city of David which is called Bethelhem, the primary branch in the family tree of Jesus Christ. We may look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart. That is unbelievably good news. AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) Meg Greenfield, "Celebrity Communion," Newsweek, May 19, 1997, p. 94.
- 2) Presbyterian Outlook, May, 2009.