

Judging a Man by His Heart

1 Samuel 16:1-13

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What is genuine manhood? That's one of the questions in the air on Father's Day. For many boys, one of the most urgent questions of childhood is "Is my Dad a real man?" Our Bible story today suggests that the real man may not be visible to the human eye. The person who turned out to be Israel's greatest hero looked, on the outside, like a boy, and the thing that marked him for greatness was not his size or strength or even his good looks, but his heart.

Here's the back story: when the people decided they wanted a king (as we read last week) and both God and Samuel let them have their way, Saul was an obvious choice. He was Mister Macho in Israel. He was a head taller than anyone else and he was the most handsome man in the nation. He was a mighty warrior. But in the end it turned out that Saul was tone-deaf when it came to matters of the spirit. He didn't quite get the whole idea of submitting his will to God's will. So Samuel told Saul that God had rejected him as king. And the historian says in the last verse of chapter 15, "Yahweh was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel." Can God ever be sorry? Can God weep over the way we use the freedom he gives us? Absolutely.

Chapter 16 begins with God asking Samuel how long he will grieve over Saul. We need to be clear that Saul is not dead. Saul is still the king, and he will remain king for several years, until he dies. But Samuel has cut off his relationship with Saul because Saul disobeyed God. So Samuel is grieving the death of a relationship and the death of his hopes for Saul's kingship.

But the Lord, Yahweh, is ready to move on. "Stop grieving. Fill your horn with oil for anointing a new king. I have already provided for myself a king." The Hebrew verb there is literally "I have seen" a king, which is the Latin root of the word *pro-video*—I see ahead. God sees ahead, he pro-vides for himself a new king.

But this is a subversive thing that Samuel does in going to Bethlehem to anoint a king. There is a king on the throne. There is no such office as king-in-waiting. If you anoint a new king, you are saying the old king is illegitimate. It would be like Archbishop Dolan swearing in Mitt Romney as President right now—or, given David's age and talents, someone swearing in *Justin Bieber* as President right now. Saul would not have been happy if he had heard about this anointing. That's why Samuel says, "How can I go? If Saul hears about it, he'll kill me!" The Lord says, "Just tell everyone that you're going to Bethlehem to offer a sacrifice to me. Take a heifer as a prop." So maybe Samuel did actually offer the sacrifice, maybe not—but he did invite Jesse and his sons to the barbecue.

Apparently Jesse understood what this was all about, because he participated in this political beauty contest. You get the impression that the old man Samuel is seated as a judge, and one by one Jesse has his sons pass in front of Samuel. In Israel, the firstborn was always the most

important. He got the lion's share of the inheritance. He was expected to lead. So of course, Jesse's oldest was introduced first. Eliab was not only the firstborn, he was tall and good-looking.

Do you have to be tall and good-looking to lead? It's no secret that in almost all of our presidential contests over the last century, the taller of the two major-party candidates has won. An awful lot of CEOs are tall and good-looking. Are we that shallow? For that matter, most churches prefer to call tall and good-looking pastors. (This church is obviously an exception.) What's up with that? It's trite to say it, but we live in a culture obsessed with the visual and with outward appearances. What does the culture say a real man is? If you judged by the visual culture, you'd have to say a real man has six-pack abs, large pecs, noticeable biceps, and a couple of days growth of beard. Plus he smells great. If he's not an athlete, he looks like one. But do you really want a male model to be your leader? Is anyone actually voting for Tom Cruise for President? (No, he's too short.)

Samuel is about to make the same mistake he made with Saul. After all, Saul was tall and good-looking. When Samuel sees this hunk named Eliab, he thinks, "Now, that's a natural leader! Surely Yahweh's anointed one is standing before me and Yahweh right now!" But the Lord speaks to Samuel and says, "Stop thinking about how good-looking or how tall they are. I have rejected this one." Then he gives Samuel a kind of proverb: "The Lord does not see the way that humans do. You humans look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." The heart, in Hebrew thought, was not the seat of the emotions. It was the center of the self—the center of will and thought and belief. Last week in Dr. Brownstein's talk on brain science, he pointed out that many of the ancients, including Aristotle, believed that thoughts came from the heart and the heart controlled the body. (The brain, for him, was just a big radiator to cool off the body.) The point being made in 1 Samuel 16:7 is that God does not judge us according to our external appearance but according to our true selves on the inside: our thoughts, our intentions, our commitments.

I went to the doctor this week to talk about my aorta. As far as I know, my aorta is fine, but last winter my big brother's aorta seemed fine and it ripped open and he died. So Becca's been after me to get it checked. Recently a banker I know told me that his daughter died right after her honeymoon of a heart blockage; he convinced her twin brother to get his heart checked and it was blocked 95% in the very same spot. While they were doing the procedure to clear his artery, the surgeon asked the father what his own cardiologist said. "I've never seen a cardiologist." "You're an idiot." My banker friend went to a cardiologist and the doctor said, "Your daughter saved your life. You have four blockages; you should be dead already. We're going straight to the hospital." When I heard that story, I thought maybe Becca was right and I should get my heart checked.

But here's the thing: you can't see my heart. The doctor here listened to it: sounds all right. But you really can't tell from the outside. You have four choices, and it may take several to get to the truth about your aorta: ultrasound, x-ray, MRI, CT scan. We can't judge your health from your outward appearance. I know, my brother looked fine and he died.

My point is not to get you worried about my health—there is probably nothing to worry about at all—but to remind you that God sees inside you. The great prayer that Thomas Cranmer wrote for the Book of Common Prayer describes God as the one “unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid.” God has x-ray vision. Jeremiah said that the Lord “sees the heart and examines the mind” (17:10). But the message in this story about Samuel is not “be very afraid” because God will find you out. The message is “Don’t judge someone by outward appearance.”

One of the disheartening things about watching the way people get hired for the summer every year on the island is that it’s pretty clear in tourist-oriented businesses that most people get hired for looks. It’s pretty disheartening to see good people who look different not even get interviews. It’s sad to see that we’re still in junior high.

It takes Samuel a while to get out of the beauty-pageant mentality. One by one Jesse’s sons walk in front of him. How do you think that went? It’s hard not to imagine them doing a little turn for the judge or a little Zoolander strut. But Samuel knew that none of them was the one. I think he was probably waiting for the holy nudge, but it’s possible that he was using a device like a pair of dice to discern Yahweh’s will. He went through seven sons, the number of completion, and you’d think that was the end of the story. There are lots of folk tales about seven sons. But this story is not over yet.

Samuel asks, “Are all your sons here?” Jesse says, “Well, there *is* the *baby* of the family. He’s out watching the sheep. I didn’t think you’d even want to bother with him. He’s the runt of the litter, and he’s just a kid.” But Samuel wants to see him. And when the youngest son arrives, he has skin that glows, and eyes that are beautiful, and he is really good-looking. Almost in spite of that, Samuel knows instantly that this is the one. Somehow he knows that God can see into this young man’s heart. Even though the eighth son is too young to be a king, Samuel hears God saying, “Get up and anoint *him* with oil, because *this* is the one.” We find out later that this boy is a musician, and a poet, and at the same time very brave. And only after he is anointed and the Spirit comes on him do we learn his name: David. Someone hearing this story for the first time might have an *aha* moment—oh, *that’s* who this story is about, David, the greatest king, the greatest hero, the greatest man.

We all know “you can’t judge a book by its cover” but we all do that when it comes to people. They say you make a first impression in the first five seconds and it’s hard to shake that later. I know some people decide about my theology and politics based on the haircut Mark gives me; I’m kind of wondering if I should look a little less like Mitt Romney. I was thinking about a summer job I had when I was in college and had hair down on my shoulders and little wire-rim glasses. I was a popsicle man, driving the Nashville equivalent of a Good Humor truck—a very popular figure among the little kids. But because I had long hair in 1971, I was assumed to be the hippie popsicle man, even though I was actually a Princeton man and I was wearing t-shirts that said things like “Follow Jesus, the head shepherd.” Teenagers would come up to me and try out their hippie jargon, as if I had just landed from Haight-Ashbury. Several times they asked me to sell them dope, just assuming that the hippie popsicle man must have grass stashed in his truck. One of the few guys who saw behind my hippie exterior was Charlie Daniels, the musician, who

had a small son and came out with him most days to buy a popsicle. “I like what you guys are doing, man. It’s a cool thing to see kids talking about Jesus.”

We all have stories about being misjudged on the basis of our appearance, but we all continue to misjudge others. But God, we know, does not do that. God knows our hearts.

One of the classic movies about seeing past appearances is the original *Shrek*. The big green ogre Shrek falls in love with the princess Fiona, but what he doesn’t know is that at night she turns into an ogre herself. Remember the scene at the end where Shrek interrupts the wedding of Fiona and the evil lord to object that he loves Fiona, and they kiss—and Fiona has been waiting for years for the kiss of her true love which will remove her curse—and she is lifted up in a magical cloud, then falls to the floor. But when she comes down, she is an ogre. “Are you all right?” Shrek asks. “Yes,” Fiona says, “but I’m still ugly. I thought I would be beautiful.” Shrek says, “But you *are* beautiful.” And as the final words of the movie say, “And they lived ugly ever after.”

Real beauty is not the skin-deep kind, and real goodness is not the kind you wear on the outside. It’s what’s in your heart. It’s what you treasure—which is where your heart is. God doesn’t judge your value or your potential on the basis of your looks or even the act you put on. God knows your heart.

I wish on Father’s Day I could say that I always judged my Dad for his heart, but it wouldn’t be true. I had a litany of complaints when I was young: that he was too strict, that he was not emotional enough, that he worked too much, that he didn’t play with us enough, that he didn’t stand up to Mom, that he was too conservative—although at the time I probably said “fascist” or “imperialist.” But by the time I was in my thirties and became a dad myself, I understood the choices he made and understood that he did the best he could. I also began to see that his manhood did not consist in his service in World War II—which he almost never talked about—or in what I saw as his John Wayne exterior. His manhood was in his heart—a heart of deep love for my mother acted out in profound servanthood when she became incapacitated by mental illness and again when she slid into Alzheimer’s. And his manhood was seen in his deep love for God and his patient faithfulness to the church with all its craziness, even though he worked for a denomination having a nervous breakdown. He’s 92 now. Many of you have met him. Somehow he got wise while I wasn’t looking—or I got less stupid. He’s the only person I know for sure reads my sermons every week, and without fail he send me a comment and a word of encouragement even if he worries that I might have gone too far this time. He tutors needy kids most weekdays. He leads hymn sings for his whole community every other week. He stays in touch with lots of Japanese Christians and retired missionaries. He visits family members and friends who are sick. I don’t know about you, but I’d say that’s a real man. If you judge by outward appearances you might think he’s just an old man, but God looks on the heart.