

GET YOUR HEART RIGHT

1 Samuel 16:1-13

for Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC

7 July 2019

Our second text comes from First Samuel Sixteen. Samuel, the prophet-judge has just told Saul, whom he anointed king years prior, that his insolence has cost him the crown. Listen for the word of God.

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.' 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." 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.' 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?' 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.

When they came, he **looked** on Eliab and thought, 'Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord.' 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.' Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, 'Neither has the Lord chosen this one.' Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, 'Neither has the Lord chosen this one.' Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, 'The Lord has not chosen any of these.' 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.' 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.' 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.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Glennon Doyle, a well known Christian author, has recently been plunged into the world of soccer. Her kids are soccer age, for one, and she is newly married to Abby Wambach, one of the best soccer players of all time. So she's found herself, presumably for the first time ever, watching the World Cup. It is clear that she's learning as she goes — but her own limited understanding hasn't stopped her from trying to explain how best to watch the sport. Recently she explored the phenomenon of “falling down,” which is to say, how the viewer should react to a on-field flop. Her answer:

“see if the person who has fallen is on your side ... if their costume is the same color is yours then that means they are on your side ... if they're on your side and they're fallen, what that means is that a horrid person from the other side has intentionally and viciously knocked your person down ... now if you check the fallen person's costume and she is not your color, that means she's on the other side ... and if that kind of person has fallen, that means that this person has intentionally lied and fallen down on the ground even though no one has done anything...”

She's not wrong, and she got me thinking—our reactions to any given incident on the field are usually colored by our bias: which team we like, what players we're rooting for, whether or not they are in garnet and black.

Come September, for instance, the Carolina defensive line could suddenly produce, in the midst of play, an actual tractor, drive it toward the quarterback, pick him up, and toss him in the stands and I would argue (especially if the other team is in orange) that it was a legitimate football move. That's what it is to be a fan: everything you see on the field is colored by what you want to happen. Every bit of data is interpreted through a lens of hope, a prejudice, really, that insists your team is morally good and excellent at sport and *must* prevail.

We like to think of ourselves as objective observers, neutral consumers of visual data. Sports show me the extreme to which that neutrality is impossible. Visual data is *always* interpreted. Our eyes make decisions based on our presumptions. In the nanoseconds before we understand what we are seeing a whole set of expectations, biases, and stereotypes have already begun to color our perception.

I mention all of this to remind you of two critical things: first, ahead of football season, the garnet uniform is always in the right and second, we can't always trust our eyes.

By this point in First Samuel, Saul, Israel's first king, has faltered. God knows that Israel needs a better man for the job. "[F]or I have provided for myself a king," the NRSV and King James read. But the language isn't quite right. The NIV opts for, "I have chosen," and the CEB "I have found the next king." Each translation circles the meaning of the Hebrew verb while avoiding its literal reading, "*I have seen my king.*" This entire chapter, the strange scene of ritual and waiting, hinges on *sight*. God has *seen* the king. For the next 12 verses our eyes will be put to the test.

The chapter unfolds slowly. Samuel is sent south. Just the going is dangerous: he has told Saul, the man he made king, that his willfulness has removed God's favor. Which makes Samuel a traitor. Worse yet, to get to Jesse, among whose sons God has seen the king, Samuel has to pass through Saul's hometown. He may have God on his side, but Saul has armies. It's treacherous, and so God provides him a bit of cover: bring a heifer, say you're passing through for a sacrifice.

It's a long walk, especially with a cow, but Samuel arrives safely in Bethlehem. The elders know that the coming of the king-maker is reason for concern. Saul could be on his heels, they could be accomplices in his treachery. But Samuel keeps his cover. The priest has come to make a sacrifice and has chosen the house of Jesse—grandson of Ruth and Boaz—to sanctify the offering. He calls on Jesse to present his sons—all of his sons—and begins, quite unknown to the household, to *look* for the king.

After the long journey south what a relief it must have been to see in Jesse's sons the sure candidate — Eliab, tall and handsome has the countenance of a king and he's the eldest, the one to whom Jesse's wealth will pass. *Behold*, Samuel thought, the man for the job!

Or is he? What follows Samuel's inner declaration is one of the best known passages in all of Scripture: "Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature [...] for the Lord sees not as man sees; for man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

In Hebrew "heart" is a many-varied thing. It is not only the seat of one's emotion, it is the center of one's volition and will, the animating force of life. Samuel sees what *he* is

looking for, he thinks he's found his man. But not a second later, Samuel hears from God that Eliab doesn't have his heart right, at least not for this job.

Eliab won't be king. Nor Abinadab. Nor Shammah. And it's not the next one, or the next one, or the next one, or the last one. Samuel is looking with his eyes, and his eyes are failing him. He sees the handsome one, the tall one, the one who can command a room. Five times in one verse a variation of "to see" is repeated and rejected. To Samuel, each son looks less a king than the next. But Samuel is looking wrong, his eyes cloudy with human expectation.

But God is looking beyond expectations, beyond what *has been*. Beyond costume and color and stature. God is staring right into the center of a heart not yet on the scene. God is calling on Samuel to look with his heart, too, to see as God does.

I wonder if St. Exupery was thinking of this passage when he penned the Fox's reminder to the Little Prince: "One sees rightly only with the heart. The essential is invisible to the eye."

There must be another son. And there is. The shepherd boy out in the field. Forgotten, so inconsequential as to be left out of the proceedings entirely.

Finally the boy arrives. He is handsome, ruddy. But it's not his eye that draws Samuel's attention. Samuel sees the boy and immediately hears God, "this is he." Everything else passes in silence. The boy, unnamed to this point, is anointed without even a word. He has nothing to his name, nothing to recommend him to the job. But his heart's right. Oil and Spirit bind David to God and to the Kingdom forevermore.

The word we know as "Messiah" is a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew verb "anointed." Ruddy David is not *the* Messiah. But he is a messiah, anointed by Samuel on behalf of the God of the universe to tend to God's sheep, to do God's work. Anointed to a vocation. And he was almost forgotten.

"There is nothing more astonishing," wrote Marilynne Robinson in her masterpiece *Gilead*, "than a human face ... Any human face is a claim on you, because you can't help but understand the singularity of it, the courage and loneliness of it."

Look with your heart on David's forgotten face. Cut out all of the noise, all of the expectations, everything you *think* you know of him. He didn't have the cut of a king,

the experience. He had no clout, no claims. Does he tell you anything about God's anointed?

When I hear Sarah McLachlan on the TV I change the channel immediately. It's not the song, but the images that inevitably follow. I know that there will be a sad animal or a sad person staring me in the face, and I can't bear it.

But this week I've been unable to avoid the images. They pop up without warning: a father and his daughter washed up on the banks of the Rio Grande, families torn apart, children locked away. And I wondered, as I sat down to write about forgotten David, what God willed for those faces, what purpose God had for them, what God saw in those pleading eyes, those broken hearts.

I wondered, as I fought the urge to change the channel, to turn the page, if my heart was right. I wondered what God was whispering in my ear, what God was asking me to see.

We are so entrenched in our ideologies, our teams, our politics, that, at least in my case, I find it more suitable to turn away, to shield my eyes, to explain away this clear foul, than to look honestly with a heart of faith at the faces and hearts of the world's forgotten.

And I've come to realize in this renewed looking that the image of God, emblazoned in our hearts, doesn't disappear when someone puts on orange and purple, or when they cross a border, or when they are jobless and just hunting a piece of the American dream. It doesn't vanish when you cross the tracks or pull up to the trailer park.

We can argue about solutions, but our faith demands that our arguments start with right hearts not with human eyes and human teams; with a recognition of shared humanity, with an eye toward Bethlehem, a forgotten shepherd, a cradle-born messiah. Russell Moore, the head of the Southern Baptist Convention, said as much this week, "Those created in the image of God should be treated with dignity and compassion [...] We can do better than this."

It is hard to look when there are more pleasant things to see. It is hard to look when the other's not wearing our costume, not caring our banners, meeting our expectations. It's hard to look when we've already made up our minds. But God calls

us to the hard work of getting our hearts right. Of seeing what is essential, what binds us, the stardust and matter that makes up God's image in each of us.

Cut the noise and look. Who do you see? Perhaps not the Messiah, but you can bet that God has a claim on the face that calls from screens and cages, that God loves that face as much as God loves each of us sitting here. And that we can always do better.

We cannot be indifferent to the littlest brother, to the detained child, the out-of-work miner, the wealthy Mr. Monopoly whose politics we may despise. We cannot be indifferent because God is not indifferent.

When he looked with his heart Samuel finally saw God's anointed. The world was never the same. Who are you called to see today? And how will that looking change Greenville, change this nation, change God's world.

Friends: hear the good news. Our eyes will fail us. But our hearts, if they are aligned with God's, never will. We can do better. Let's get our hearts right.

—*Leigh Stuckey*