

Seeing from God's Perspective – June 14, 2015

1 Samuel 15:34 – 16:13

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I think it's probably safe to say that one of the most well-known films of all time is the movie "It's A Wonderful Life." Perhaps what makes this film so memorable is its central theme - that one person can affect and influence the life of someone else. Believing that everyone would be better off without him, the movie's main character George Bailey gets a glimpse of what life would be like had he never been born. It's not surprising to me the popularity and the longevity of this particular movie. It is a classic because its theme is central to the human condition. Who we are and what we do impacts the lives of those around us.

Often when I attend leadership training programs, one of the exercises that is generally included goes something like this. Each participant is asked to think about one person, besides our parents, who had a direct impact on our personal growth and development. Very often we find that our mentors are regular people – teachers, coaches, professors, camp counselors, Sunday school workers, youth volunteers, church folks. These were people who nurtured and supported our dreams and encouraged us to try again when we failed. These were regular people whose presence enriched our lives and whose absence would have been a significant loss to us. Regular, ordinary people who made a difference.

Our society attempts to counter this insight. Money, status, authority, beauty, importance – those are the ideals to which we are supposed to strive. To be rich enough, thin enough, powerful enough – those are things that attempt to lure us. Outward appearance is given a place of importance, and because of this, a huge majority of folks are often overlooked in terms of their worth and contribution to society. This reliance on status and power and outward appearance has been around a long time. And despite our ability to think and reason, that notion seems almost instinctual to us humans as we find ourselves drawn to persons of status and power and charisma. The opposite is also true. We tend avoid and push away those who are weak and powerless and unattractive.

Throughout the Bible, we hear repeated stories of God choosing leaders from those who come from humble origins. Or we see God giving important tasks to those who seem unimportant and ordinary. Perhaps God recognizes something we humans cannot comprehend. Perhaps the sight of God goes beyond the outward appearance. In our Old Testament lesson we find that to be true.

The story begins with the prophet Samuel grieving over that fact that the first king of Israel, Saul, had really ticked God off. Saul appeared to be everything a king should be – strong, handsome, and with a good pedigree. On all accounts, he seemed a worthy choice. Yet Saul had one major flaw. He was disobedient to the will of God, and that was unacceptable. Samuel was distressed. He was the one who had anointed Saul for his kingship, and now he was hurt that things did not work according to plan.

God however was ready to move on. God already had a successor in mind, and he called the prophet Samuel to quit wallowing in his misery and go to Bethlehem to anoint the new guy. This prospect frightened Samuel. If Saul found out, there would be hell to pay. Anointing a new king while the current one was still seated on the throne was an act of treason. God calmed the fearful prophet and gave Samuel a believable cover story. Take a cow with you and invite the town to participate in a ritual sacrifice.

The townsfolk heard of Samuel's approach and began quaking in their sandals. The arrival of God's prophet to their little burg did not bode well. They thought they were in for a sound thrashing. Remember, Samuel was a famous prophet and generally did not make casual calls to the local villages, and so the elders in town wondered what they had done to warrant God's anger. Who had sinned badly enough to require a visit by the legendary Samuel? One scholar commented that "people in general carry enough residual guilt around with them that the very mention of the word 'God' provokes uneasiness, if not downright terror." (Peterson, First and Second Samuel, p. 93) People generally prefer to stay out of God's line of sight.

Their minds were put at ease immediately when Samuel reassured them he came in peace for a time of sacrifice to God. The people then prepared themselves for the festival celebration. In the meantime, Samuel located the man whom God instructed him to find. He invited Jesse and his sons to the sacrifice. God had told him the next king would be among Jesse's sons, so he considered them carefully. The oldest was a young man named Eliab. Upon first glance he seemed to fit the part of future king – tall, strong, and handsome - and Samuel quickly assumed this was the one. Yet God countered that assumption.

God told Samuel to not be swayed by outward appearances. Though he may look the part, God was not impressed. God said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or 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." Samuel was not one to give up easily. Jesse had more sons for the prophet to examine. Each was brought before Samuel, but one by one, each was found to be unacceptable and the tension began to mount.

After seven sons had been brought to him, Samuel still had not found the right one. He looked around but saw no more boys. He wondered if he were in the right place or if this were the right family. With a twinge of frustration, Samuel asked Jesse, "Have you no more sons? Are they all here?" Jesse dropped his gaze, unable to look the prophet in the eye. "There's another," he mumbled. "The youngest. He's out in the field, tending the sheep."

There's a note of insignificance here in the Hebrew text, as if this youngest son was no more than an afterthought. The runt of the litter. When Samuel had asked Jesse to bring his sons to the sacrifice, the youngest wasn't even considered. He had the grunt job, out in the field, away from everybody, and he was of no consequence. When Samuel heard this, he commanded them to get the boy – no

one would rest until the child arrived there on the scene. The older brothers were probably shocked that this great prophet was remotely interested in their baby brother. He had no standing, he was of no account. Why on earth would Samuel want to see him?

When the youngest son arrived, no doubt he was bewildered by all the fuss. He had no status, he was by no means special, and yet now, for some reason, he was the center of attention. He probably had no idea who Samuel was – to him he was just some strange old man. Yet this old man stood up and came to him, while his father and brothers stood all around. The man took a horn and poured out some oil, and anointed his head with it. And perhaps a shiver ran down his spine when the spirit of God came upon him. He had no idea what was happening at that moment, but it must be something big. And it is only here, when he was anointed by the prophet Samuel, that we finally learn that his name is David.

Things didn't change overnight. It took a long time before David finally found his destiny as the next king of Israel, but that day, God claimed him. He had no status, he had no power, he had no pedigree. In fact, his great-grandmother was a woman named Ruth, who was a Moabite. She came from a race of people despised by the Hebrews. Ironically, the text does tell us that David was a handsome boy. But it wasn't his outward appearance that mattered to God. God looked into the heart of this boy, the eighth son of Jesse, and saw the heart of a king.

Presbyterian writer and scholar Eugene Peterson captures the essence of this story when he writes, "Throughout my childhood, in my mother's telling of this story, I became David. I was always David. I still am David. It's the intent and skill of this scriptural storyteller to turn everyone who reads or hears the story into realizing something essentially Davidic about him or herself: 'In my insignificant, sheep-keeping obscurity, I am chosen.'" (Peterson, Leap Over a Wall, p. 17)

God took a normal, average, generic person and turned him into a king. God called him out of obscurity and used him for great purposes. And even as a king, David still had his faults. He made mistakes, he made some pretty big mistakes. But he always kept his faith and trust in God central in his life.

There are two lessons here. The obvious one is that it gives us hope, knowing that God sees into our hearts. Unlike the world around us, God doesn't care how much money we make or how pretty we are. God isn't worried about the extent of our intelligence or if we come from a dysfunctional family. In our normalcy God calls each one of us to greatness.

In our gospel reading this morning from Mark, Jesus told his disciples the parable of the mustard seed. From a tiny, almost insignificant little seed comes a great bush upon which numerous birds find their rest in its branches. This parable was told by Jesus to encourage his followers. Small beginnings don't necessarily result in small endings. Great things can be sown from insignificance. Ultimately it's a parable about the Kingdom of God, that because God is in control, great things will happen. For us

it is encouragement to forge ahead, following Christ where he calls us. Because even the smallest things that we do to further God's kingdom will bear fruit beyond our comprehension. It's a parable that tells us to never give up or allow discouragement to overwhelm us.

That's one lesson – to believe and know that God can and will use us, despite our ordinariness, despite our flaws.

The other lesson here is one of warning. Realizing that God does in fact see things from God's perspective not from human perspective, there is a caution to us not to jump on the worldly bandwagon. Sometimes we get caught in the trap of viewing people by societal standards not by Godly standards. We're quick to point out the flaws in others. We measure our self-worth based upon how much better we are than so-and-so down the street, or we fail to recognize the privilege that we have been born into, assuming that others are marginalized due to their own efforts or lack thereof.

This type of thinking leads to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness. It can often result in an us-versus-them type of mentality. This of course extends far beyond ourselves, to a national or even global level. And if we're not careful, we'll get sucked into the trap of making generalizations and stereotyping entire classes and races and beliefs of people who are different than us. Whenever we catch ourselves making these types of worldly judgments, or when we hear others doing the same thing, let us remember that each one of us was created in God's holy image, and despite appearances to the contrary, that is what is important. When we begin looking at others through God's eyes, we will start to see that inner beauty that has its root in God. This will in turn effect how we treat others, respecting and encouraging mutual growth.

Every person has innate worth. We are worthy and others are worthy. Each of us has something to contribute and share. Nothing is insignificant. When we encourage one another to share our gifts and talents that's when significant things begin to happen. If we look back at our own lives, and recall those persons who had a special impact on us and our growth, think about who they were. Were they regular, ordinary people? Probably. But what made them special is the fact that they took an interest in us. They saw us from God's perspective – they saw the promise within us. They took their time and energy to spur us forward. They gave of themselves to encourage us to grow. And now it's our turn.

Look at the world through from God's perspective. Look beyond outward appearances to find what really matters. Where in your life can you begin to make a difference in the life of someone else? It doesn't have to be something huge. From the smallest seed planted in fertile soil can come amazing growth.