



Content of Character: God Looks At The Heart
A Sermon on 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

Sunday, June 17th, 2018 ~ 4th Sunday of Pentecost
First Federated Church of Peoria, IL
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On August 28, 1963 Martin Luther King Jr. made it clear that he saw the world as God sees the world. In his "I Have A Dream" speech he said, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." Dr. King had realized a profound truth. God doesn't look at outward appearances. Rather, "...the Lord looks on the heart." Or "the content of their character." Embracing that truth, Dr. King was determined to transform how people saw one another. What Dr. King championed was a radical change in worldview, one that, today, is still met with some resistance. Instead of seeing skin color and other physical features first, he believed that people must see each other as God sees people, through the content of their character.

Dr. King wasn't offering something new to the world, but rather something old, as old as Israel itself. Dr. King was so immersed in the world of Scripture, he certainly knew the story that comes from our text this morning. He knew the story of Samuel and the radical way in which God calls us to see people. One day, while Samuel was still upset about the way things were going under Israel's first king, Saul, God stopped by for a visit. While chatting with Samuel, God told him "I have provided for myself a [new] king." (vs. 2) Then God told Samuel to go visit a man named Jesse, the Bethlehemite with eight sons. Samuel laced up his sandals and went over to Jesse's place. When he arrived Jesse invited him in and began to parade his sons, one by one, before Samuel. Immediately, Samuel saw Eliab and thought "There is the new king." Eliab had all the right looks for a king. He was well composed. His posture communicated confidence and leadership. To top it all off, he was tall, making him look like a bold, strong warrior, the perfect king. As Samuel watched Eliab walk by he thought "Surely, the Lord's anointed is before the Lord." (vs. 6) In modern English, Samuel was like "God do you see what I see? Look at this guy. He is the right man for the job." The problem was Samuel was using physical criteria to judge Eliab fitness for leadership. It had nothing to do with the content of his character or his heart. Samuel saw Eliab as the world saw him.

We all evaluate people based on how they look, instead of their heart. We know it's true because we put on certain clothing when we go for a job interview. Studies show that if you don't wear the right clothing, or if you dress a bit too sloppy, no matter how qualified you are for the job, no matter how good your resume is, you're unlikely to get the job because of the way you look. Without taking the time needed to truly get to know someone we make snap decisions based on what we can see. Interview clothing is just one small example of how people are judged based on their appearance. There are countless others, many of which are far more wicked. The Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann once said that judgements rendered upon that which is visible has given rise to some of the most insidious plagues in the world. He said that because people look at the outside, ageism exists,

because people are judged by their gender, sexism exists, because people are evaluated by the color of their skin, racism exists. Determining a person's worth or capability based only on what is visible unchristian, and it is something that Samuel struggled with. If we are honest, it is one we, too, often struggle with.

As we have read this morning, seven of Jesse's sons were put on display for Samuel to evaluate. He thought Eliab would be the next king, simply because he looked the part, but God doesn't see people the way people see each other. God looks at the inside. God told Samuel that Eliab was not the one. Samuel looked on to the next son and thought "Ahh this must be the one." Again, God told him that he wasn't to be king either. This kept happening until seven of Jesse's sons had been brought before Samuel. But there was another son, one yet to be seen, Jesse's youngest, David. Jesse called for David who was out in the field looking after his dad's sheep. It was David, the least likely of the bunch, that God chose as king. God looked into David's character, into his heart and knew he had the qualities needed to be a king. Samuel must have been in disbelief at this point. David couldn't be the next king, he was shorter. He was too young, he looked a little too sloppy from being outside chasing sheep around. Judged on outward appearance alone he didn't look anything like a king. The good news for David was that God didn't see people as the world did. God didn't look at his outward appearance to determine his value. God looked at his heart. That day, God told Samuel David was the right one and he was to anoint him as the next king straight away. All of that is to say, the physical traits Samuel looked for to pick a king were not the same things God looked at. Samuel looked at the outside, while God looked at the inside.

In addition to being a pastor and civil rights activist, Dr. King was once the president of The Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The SCLC, just like Dr. King, has a radical worldview. They believe the content of a person's character is the most important thing, not age, gender, or race. The SCLC is committed to transforming the nation. They are working to help people see others in a different, radical way. The process of doing so is a time taking, pain staking, for it is much easier to make a snap decision based on appearance than it is to understand a person by their heart. No matter how difficult it might be that is precisely what God has charged all Christians to do, and the SCLC is following up on that charge. We are to help transform this world into a place where character and heart matter most. We are to see people as God sees them.

The good news for the newly crowned King David was that God looked in his heart not at his appearance. The fact that God looked at David's heart, instead of anything else, is good news for us all. God doesn't judge anyone, including us, based on the way they look, as a hiring agent may when they are trying to fill a job. God is radically kind. God does not look at our age, our gender, or our race. God looks at our inside, at our heart.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen