

“God Looks On the Heart”

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1 Samuel 15:34 – 16:13

Mark 4:26-34

Recently one of our grandchildren told Tom and me, “I’ve got to find something that I’m great at.” Now, mind you, this is an attractive and bright teenager who has plenty of friends and is doing very well in high school. But she feels she should have a specialty, something that will make her stand out from her peers. The trouble is, the world is full of talented teenagers. Unless you put all your energy into perfecting one skill starting at age 4 or 5, or focus on an extremely narrow field, such as the mating pattern of some obscure insect in a remote part of the world, it’s hard to stand out.

Adults often ask children what they want to do or be when they grow up. And children feel pressure to choose something important that will have a big impact on the world. But if you look at stories in the Bible, you see that God often chooses the most insignificant people to do the greatest things. So rather than training for future greatness, maybe it’s better to work on being faithful in the little things we do today.

This morning Jack read the story of the anointing of David as king. David turned out to be the greatest king Israel ever had. He set the standard for all the kings after him, and provided the model which inspired Israel’s hope for a Messiah or Savior. But when Samuel anointed David to be king, he was nobody. His father didn’t even think to call him in from the fields when Samuel invited them to join him for a ritual sacrifice. David was the youngest in a family of eight sons. The youngest son in any family back then would have no status or privileges at all. So David was the one who had to stay out in the fields and watch the sheep. Besides, David’s older brothers were good-looking and strong. But God told Samuel not to look at how tall the older sons were, not to pay attention to their looks or age, for God does not see as people see. People see what’s on the outside, but God sees what’s in your heart.

Now, David was good-looking. It says his cheeks were red and his eyes were beautiful. But he certainly didn’t look like a man who was ready to become king. He was just a boy, and a shepherd boy at that. And there was already a king in Israel when Samuel anointed David. Remember we read last week how Samuel didn’t want to anoint anyone as king. He wanted his own sons to take over for him and lead as prophets. But the people really wanted a king, and God said OK.

Israel’s first king was hardly the image of royalty. Saul came from a humble family from the smallest tribe of Israel and was not eager to step into leadership. When Samuel gathered everyone to choose the king and the lot fell on Saul, no one could find him. It turns out Saul was hiding among the baggage (10:22). So the people dragged him out and Saul became their king.

Saul proved to be a good leader and warrior. But his heart was not in it and he was morally weak. He was impatient and gave in to pressure from his soldiers to keep some of the spoils of war, against God's command (ch. 15). And so we read this morning that "Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel." Apparently in the *Old Testament*, God is allowed to make some mistakes, just like anyone else. The first king didn't work out, so God looked out for the next leader.

Anointing a new king while the old king was still in power could be dangerous. So when God told Samuel to anoint a new king, Samuel said to God, "If Saul hears about this, he's going to kill me." So David didn't come to power for a long time. After Samuel anointed him, he went right back to caring for his father's sheep, a humble job, hardly a job for someone heading for greatness. But the spirit of the Lord was with him, and he did his job faithfully. And he was wise and brave. And while he watched the sheep, he learned how to play the harp.

Meanwhile, Saul started to become more and more tormented and miserable. His servants told him about a boy named David who played the harp. So Saul sent for David, so he could soothe him with music when he was upset. Saul came to love David as his own son, and David became his servant and armor bearer. Little did Saul know that he was training David to become king himself.

As David grew older, he fought along with Saul against the Philistines, and he was clever and successful in battle. He won Saul's daughter in marriage, and he became close friends with Saul's son Jonathan, who scriptures say loved David "as his own soul." (18:1-3). Eventually Saul became jealous of David's popularity and success, and this festered into murderous rage. Twice he threw a spear at David while he played the harp, trying to kill him. He sent David on impossible missions, expecting that he would die in battle. Finally Saul sent messengers to David's house to kill him outright. David escaped and camped out in a cave, which became his home base. Saul searched for him, killing anyone he heard had helped David.

Through all this, David still treated Saul with honor. Once when David had an opportunity to kill Saul himself, he said to his men, "The Lord forbid that I should do this thing to my lord... to raise my hand against him, for he is the Lord's anointed." And when Saul was finally killed by the Philistines, David did the right thing. He did not rejoice. Instead he wept and fasted, in mourning for Saul.

As king, David was not perfect. He committed a few famous sins. You can read about David and Bathsheba in the second book of Samuel (ch. 11), where David stole a man's beloved wife and then had the man killed. But David was deeply religious and respected the voice of the prophets. And when he was found to have done wrong, he didn't try to cover it up or make excuses. He admitted his wrong, took the consequences and turned back to God.

Psalm 139 says, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

And Psalm 51 says, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.” The Psalms are attributed to King David, and these two Psalms certainly sound like something he would write. David was a good man, but he knew his heart was not pure. Yet he didn’t treasure his secret sins or hold on to them. He opened his heart to God and let God work in him. And that’s what made him a great man.

None of us have pure hearts either. All of us have some selfishness, or fear or anger that keeps our hearts from seeing clearly and loving fully. But even when our hearts are full of trouble, God knows who we are. God knows where we have come from. And God sees our deepest desires. And we too can pray, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” We may never become the greatest at anything. But we can have a heart for God, a desire for goodness and truth. And that is the beginning of greatness.

Even if we never become great, we can be ourselves, and do what we can today, with faith and love. David started small. He was chosen to be king when he was just a boy. And in the lesson from Mark that Anne read this morning, Jesus said that the Kingdom of God is like a small mustard seed, that when planted in the ground, grows into a great bush or shrub.

In many Old Testament passages the Kingdom of God is compared to a mighty tree. But in the Middle East, the mustard plant is considered a weed. It never grows as large or strong as a tree, but it’s hardy and tends to take over. And this is what Jesus chose to describe God’s reign: a weed, a shrub, something scruffy and tenacious, something that takes hold and grows.

We don’t have to be “great” ourselves to be part of the great things God is doing in the world. In fact, God prefers to work through little things, a tiny seed, a young boy or girl, a gesture of kindness, a small act of faith, a step into courage, forgiveness and love. These little things take root and multiply. And suddenly we realize that we are surrounded by the greatness of God.

Today we gather at the table of our Lord. At this table God welcomes kings and peasants, the handsome and the homely, saints and sinners, all who have been redeemed and made new in Christ. We welcome everyone, not because they are attractive, or they fit in, or they impress us with their goodness, knowledge or skills, but because we are all loved and forgiven and invited by God. And when we pass the peace before communion today, we are welcoming each other to this table, in the name of the one who knows us, forgives us, and invites us, Jesus Christ. Amen.