

## ***LOOK ON THE HEART***

a sermon based on I Samuel 16:1-13

John 9:1-34

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Today's Hebrew Scripture is one of those that everyone says, "I'm sure glad I'm not the one up there reading today! All those difficult names to pronounce!" Of course, no one else knows for sure how most of them **are** pronounced! So, no one would know if they were being pronounced correctly or not. It's rather like that old song, "I say po-tay-to, you say po-tah-to, I say to-may-to, you say to-mah-to..." But we are no quite so glib when it comes to reading the Scriptures — in worship — in front of the congregation. In other contexts, correct pronunciation of Hebrew names may not matter all that much but when I ask people to read the Scriptures for worship, one of the first things many will ask is, "Are there any names or words that are hard to pronounce?" Even with reassurances that no one out in the congregation would know the difference, the one who is reading almost always worries about mis-pronouncing this word or that. They will often ask me how to pronounce certain words and I will tell them how I have pronounced it. But sometimes I'm not absolutely certain, myself. So, if I am reading it in worship, I just say it with such confidence that everyone assumes I know how to say it correctly. But, I appreciate where lay readers are coming from. They want to do a good job. Whatever a person is doing in the worship service, whether it be reading the Scriptures, presenting a stewardship moment, or singing or playing a musical piece, or sharing one's spiritual journey, I remind people, "They're all your friends out there and they love you and they are grateful that you are sharing your gifts or your story with them.

However, from time to time, there will be glitches, and people will fret over missteps and mispronunciations at which point, we all need to remember, "God looks upon the Heart." God doesn't care if we pronounce a Greek word this way or that. God just receives our efforts as an offering from our hearts.

That's what the prophet Samuel learned when God sent him to anoint one of Jesse's boys to be the future king of Israel. But Samuel didn't know in advance which one he was to anoint. So, he told Jesse to assemble his sons on the assumption that God would tell him which one to anoint. Jesse presented seven sons to Samuel. The first and eldest obviously impressed Samuel with his stature and handsomeness. But God told Samuel, "Do not look upon his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord sees not as human beings see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks upon the heart." [1 Samuel 6: 7] Samuel went through all seven sons but he didn't get a message from God to anoint any of these.

So, Samuel asked Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And Jesse said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." Jesse assumed that Samuel was looking for one of his older sons, not the youngest son, the one who was at the bottom of the heap, a kid who was so far down the birth order he wasn't likely to inherit a thing, a lad who was so young he was assigned the dangerous task of herding the sheep because he was thought to be almost expendable! This boy, David, had not even been brought in from tending sheep to stand with his brothers because his father assumed David wouldn't even be considered. But God had said to Samuel, "Do not just look on his appearance or on the height of his stature....for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

You may have noticed that as David came into the room he was described with these words: "Now David was ruddy and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. And the Lord said, 'Arise, Samuel, anoint him; for this is he.'" Now, what's that all about? Hadn't God just told Samuel that appearance wasn't important? "Do not look upon his appearance or on the height of his stature....for the Lord sees not as human beings see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks upon the heart."

This might best be explained by the fact that the story had been passed on from generation to generation in the oral tradition and, by the time it was written down,

David had become the stuff of legends. He was the one who had killed Goliath, the Philistine warrior giant. David was the one who had united the 12 tribes into the nation of Israel. He was the one who had expanded Israel's boundaries and amassed great wealth for the kingdom. So, it was almost to be expected that, as the story of David was passed on, he would be described in more and more extravagant terms, not only in what he accomplished but in his appearance, as well.

At the same time, it should be said that David, the so-called greatest king of Israel, was really not the wonderful guy legend has made him out to be. In fact, he was a greedy, womanizing, power-hungry megalomaniac, a man who ordered another man, Uriah, to be killed so that David could take Uriah's wife as his own. But, those who told the stories about David down through time, may have wanted to polish his rather tarnished image and, in the process, they described him as "ruddy and having beautiful eyes and handsome."

About 1,000 years later, a man called Jesus came upon the scene. Over that span of time, the character of ordinary people had not changed very much in that they still looked on outward appearances. It's hard-wired into our psyche.

The movie, "The Sixth Sense" told of how a young boy named Cole was able to see and talk to dead people. Consider what he says at one point in the film: "I see dead people. They don't know they're dead. They don't see each other. They only see what they want to see."

It was this characteristic of seeing people for who they really were that separated Jesus from the rest of the pack. He, like God, did not judge by outward appearances. Jesus looked on the heart.

The story of Jesus healing the blind man in the Gospel of John suggests that the boy's words describe the people who criticized the healing of the blind man. They

saw only what they wanted to see. In contrast, the blind man is shown to have better vision than the people around him! He saw what others refused to see and.....he had the guts to tell the what he saw, or more to the point, HOW he saw. He told them the story of his healing even though those in power were not willing to SEE that he was the very one who was born blind and now could see because Jesus had healed him.

Did you notice how everyone kept asking the healed blind man how it was that he received his sight and who it was that had done this for him? It was as if they couldn't quite believe what they were seeing. His neighbors wanted to think he was someone who LOOKED like the blind man. But the man kept saying, "I am the man." They kept asking, "How were your eyes opened?" He would repeat, over and over, what he had told others, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash. Then I went and washed and received my sight.'"

This may seem like a strange way to heal a man's blindness, but it was a common ritual for healing in Jesus' day. Down through time, this event has become a part of the secular culture in the form of a drinking toast, "Here's mud in your eye!" ...which supposedly means, "here's to clearer vision!" Actually, after several toasts with the accompanying drinks, one is more likely to have blurred vision than clearer vision! But then, clearer vision isn't a highly desired outcome from drinking.

As for the Pool of Siloam, it was thought to have healing power, especially when it began to bubble and swirl from the artesian springs flowing in from time to time. The wonderful old Negro spiritual, "Wadin' in the Water," comes from this healing tradition. "Wadin' in the water, Wadin' in the water, Lordy, Wadin' in the water. God's goin' to trouble the water!"

As for the Pharisees, they didn't bother to question the nature of the miracle. They were aware of the healing ritual and the healing powers of the Pool of Siloam. No, they weren't worried about how Jesus performed the healing miracle. They were

outraged that Jesus had healed on the Sabbath because healing a man's blindness was categorized as work according to the Jewish Sabbath law and Jesus had therefore transgressed the law when he healed the blind man on the Sabbath. "This man is not from God for he does not observe the Sabbath."

Still others refused to acknowledge the miracle because they believed only the holiest of human beings could perform such a healing and it was obvious that Jesus was no more than an ordinary man. They said, "How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs and miracles?"

Then the people went to his parents and asked them, "Is this your son, who you say was born blind?" They said he was but, being afraid of what the religious leaders might do to them, they told the leaders they did not know how their son received his sight.

So, the crowd went back to the healed blind man and asked him again, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He replied, "I have told you already, and you would not listen." Then, he managed to silence them by asking, "Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?" Of course, that was the last thing they wanted! They would rather stand by and question the authenticity of his having been healed. They would rather criticize Jesus for healing on the Sabbath or for presuming to be holy enough to heal, they would rather criticize Jesus than simply rejoice with the blind man who now could see for the first time in his life!

The Pharisees could not and would not believe that Jesus, this humble, ordinary man from Nazareth had the authority from God to heal. They felt they were the only really righteous people in Israel. So, when the healed blind man said, "Do you also want to become his disciples?" he touched a nerve.

Someone once said to Helen Keller, "What a pity you have no sight!" Helen Keller replied, "Yes, but what a pity so many have sight but cannot see!"

Helen's comment reminds us how we see only what we want to see and fail to see on the heart. I have a story.

It is a story of an unhappy beggar who was sitting across the street from an artist's studio. The artist saw him and thought he would make an interesting portrait study. So, from a distance he painted a portrait of this man who sat with drooped shoulders and downcast eyes. When he was finished, he took the portrait over to the beggar so he could look at it.

"Who is that?" the beggar questioned. The painting bore a slight resemblance to himself, but in the painting before him he saw a person of dignity, with squared shoulders and bright uplifted eyes, almost handsome! He asked the artist, "Is that me? I don't look like that." The artist replied, "Yes, but that is the person I see in you." The artist looked on that man's heart and saw a man who had value and dignity.

When I heard about the Supreme Court's 5 to 4 decision to let the 270 detainees held at Guantanamo Bay prison seek their release in civilian court, I wondered, can we look on their hearts? Are we coming to the point where we can see them as human beings and judge them by their deeds and not just by their Middle Eastern origins or connections?

Jesus looked on people's hearts and he could see what they themselves often could NOT see...their inner being, the person who resided within the shell, the person who was created in God's image. I have a story.

It happened in a beautiful New England church the members of whom belonged to the town's aristocracy. The worship service was well underway and the pews fairly well filled when a young man with long hair and an earring in his ear came walking

down the aisle looking for a seat. The congregation pretended not to see him. He didn't fit. That was obvious. The young man just kept walking until he got up to the front row. Nobody had moved over to make room for him so he sat down on the floor right at the front. The minister continued with his sermon. Meanwhile, one of the ushers came from the back. He was elderly and somewhat frail. He walked very slowly and deliberately down to where the young man was sitting on the floor. The congregation was satisfied that the usher would show the young man out the door. But when the old man got to where the young man was seated, instead of telling him to leave, the old man bent over and very slowly and carefully sat on the floor beside the young man. The minister said, "What I have said here today will not be remembered beyond a day or two, if that. But what you have just seen is a sermon that will be forever in our hearts."

God looks upon our hearts. Shouldn't we try to do the same thing?

And let the people say, "Amen."