

Date: March 6, 2005

SUNDAY: Lent 4

SERMON: Get Real!

Text(s): 1 Samuel 16:1-13; John 9:1-41

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When our daughters were in their early adolescent years, my wife used to quote that old bit of wisdom in the mother's manual, that is passed down from mother to daughter in every generation: "It doesn't matter what you look like on the outside, dear; what's really important is the kind of person you are on the inside." And of course, they believed her about as much as any thirteen or fourteen year-old who's in the throes of the emotional and physical changes of adolescence would, which is to say, not for one minute. The image they saw in the mirror was much more powerful than the mother's manual of wisdom. At that age, appearances are everything.

It's not just teenagers, however, who are so concerned with appearances, is it? If you happened to see Maureen Dowd's column in the *NY Times* this week (nytimes.com, March 3, 2005) her rant about the cosmetic surgery industry was both entertaining and alarming. Some of the companies that produce products like Botox or other wrinkle-removing solutions that you can get yourself injected with, are now beginning to offer rewards for repeat treatments, much like airlines offer "frequent flyer" miles. One company that produces a wrinkle-removing treatment called "Restylane" which consists of injections whose effects last about six months and cost about \$500, is offering an incentive to keep you coming back. If you get the syringe box top from your cosmetic doctor, send it in, you earn a cash reward, toward your next treatment. Isn't that fantastic! And lest the men feel slighted, Pfizer, the maker of Viagra is offering discounts for repeat customers, and it's apparently been a big success.

We live in an age when image is everything and substance counts for very little, when the commercials hyping consumer products on television are often more entertaining and

cleverly done than the programs themselves. The message is clear: you are what you buy; you are what you wear; you are what kind of car you drive; you are what you make yourself out to be. It seems to be getting more and more difficult to discern reality from appearances, though both of our lessons today suggest that this is an age-old human problem.

We see this concern for appearances at work in the story of the selection of David as King of Israel which we read this morning.

In the past, the leaders of ancient Israel were chosen for their prophetic insight into God's will. Samuel, who is regarded as the father of the prophets, had himself been chosen for this reason. His ability to discern God's leading marked him out for leadership, and for many years, he led this motley collection of nomadic tribes of sheep and goat-herders well. But when Israelites began to settle into the Canaanite cities and began to observe the more urban civilization of their neighbors, they discovered that one of things that distinguished them from their Canaanite and Philistine neighbors was that these other people had kings, and so they wanted a king too. They wanted, not only the word of the Lord spoken through the divinely-called prophet; they wanted the appearance of godlikeness in their rulers. They wanted a king who would live in a palace and be rich and powerful and warlike. It would make them more respectable in the eyes of their neighbors than being a bunch of Bedouin goat-herders, led by a charismatic religious prophet.

So Samuel (and God too, as the story tells it) very reluctantly gave in to the popular desire for keeping up appearances, and he anointed Saul king over Israel. The period of the monarchy had begun. But Saul proved to be a disaster for the nation. Headstrong, proud, and willful, he was a great disappointment both to Samuel and to God, and so Samuel announced that God had decreed that Saul's line would not continue on the throne of Israel. A new king had to be found who would meet God's approval. That's where our story picks up.

In the choice of David to be king, we see that even Samuel had difficulty distinguishing between appearances and reality. Led to the family of Jesse of Bethlehem, he discerns that one of Jesse's sons will be God's choice as king. So one by one, Jesse's sons are called to come before Samuel and Samuel's task is to discern the one whom God has selected to be king.

When the eldest son, Eliab comes to Samuel, Samuel is smitten with his obvious look of leadership; he's tall, he's good-looking, he's got that kingly bearing about him, and Samuel says, *"Surely the Lord's anointed is now before him."* But the Lord doesn't see it that way. God says 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 human beings see; mortals look on appearances, but the Lord looks on the heart."* And one by one, seven of Jesse's sons pass before Samuel, and in each case, he gets the word, "This is not the one."

Finally, he asks Jesse if he has any more sons, and Jesse says, "Only the youngest who is out tending the sheep." So Samuel insists they call the eighth son whose name is David, and lo, and behold, to everyone's surprise, he turns out to be the one whom God approves. Now the irony is, that in appearance, he is every bit as well-favored as his brothers. We're told he was of ruddy complexion and had beautiful eyes and was handsome. The point is, however, that those outer features were of no consequence whatever in the Lord's selection of David to be king. It was the state of David's heart that distinguished him from his brothers, and it was that inner reality of his being, the kind of person he was on the inside that really mattered. So Samuel anointed him with oil in the midst of his brothers, and our writer says, *"the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward."*

Human beings look on appearances, but the Lord looks on the heart. What a revolution it would create within our world and within our churches if we began to see as God sees—to

focus less on appearances, less on creating a socially-acceptable image for ourselves, and more on trying to form and transform the inward reality of our hearts. We have a word for a person who is the same on the inside as he or she appears to be on the outside. We call it integrity. An integrated person is a person whose inner life and outer behavior correspond. A heart which is true issues in words that are true. A heart which is filled with love issues in loving words and deeds. A heart that is honest issues in deeds and words that have the ring of honesty. A heart which is just issues in deeds which are just.

Jesus had that sort of integrity. It was one of the secrets of his power. Why did the religious leaders in our gospel lesson get so offended at Jesus' healing of the man who was blind from birth? Why were they so threatened by his confident and almost blithe violation of the religious law of the sabbath? Was it because they cared more about protecting their sacred religious practices than they did about how those practices affected real people with real struggles? Was it because they weren't used to seeing the kind of power unleashed by the perfect integrity of heart and action that Jesus demonstrated? Was it because keeping up appearances was more important to them than compassion and love? Perhaps it was all of these things.

At any rate, they come to the man who has been healed trying to get him to disavow any connection with Jesus, and they say to him, *"We know that this man who healed you is a sinner because he violated the sabbath law."* The healed man himself then points out to them their failure to discern what is real. *"Here is an astonishing thing,"* he says, *"you are supposed to be religious leaders, men of God, and yet you can't recognize the work of God when it's done before your very eyes. I don't know whether he's a sinner or not; one thing I know: once I was blind, but now I can see."* There's a man firmly in touch with reality.

C. S. Lewis in his book *The Great*

Divorce, describes an imaginary scene in which some tourists are taking a bus trip. We learn that the tourists are all residents of hell, and they're out for a day-trip to heaven. On board are a variety of people, including a bishop who was a famous theologian, known for his skeptical debunking of what he considered out-dated beliefs, such as the reality of heaven and hell. When they get to heaven, they're told that if they wish to stay, they're welcome to do so, but for those who don't wish to stay, the bus will leave at a certain time to go back to hell.

One might wonder why anyone would not want to stay in heaven, but in fact, only one person on the whole bus does—the narrator of the story. He discovers, as do all the others, that the chief difference between heaven and hell, is that in heaven everything is real, and in hell, nothing is. All is merely the shadow of reality. All is appearances. The shades, for that is what the tourists discover they are, find the grass in heaven feels like knife blades on their feet, the light is blinding to their eyes, everything they touch is hard and unyielding. But that's only because they are so un-real. Many residents of heaven come out to greet them and make them welcome, and they urge them to stay. The grass will start to feel softer, they say, when you've been here long enough to start becoming real yourself. The light will not be blinding when you develop real eyes. Just be patient. Be brave. Have faith. Stay here with us and become real. But with the exception of the narrator, no one does. They all value the illusions they've lived with all their lives too much to give them up and accept reality. They have to keep up appearances. The bishop, for example, is so much in love with his image of himself as a creative and skeptical theologian that he can't tolerate living in a place he spent a lifetime proving didn't exist. So they all pile on the bus and head back to hell again. Heaven has just too much reality.

Don't we all flee from reality in favor of

appearances to a greater or lesser extent? And yet, don't we also recognize and respect reality when we see it? What's the highest compliment we can pay a person? Isn't it to say that he or she is a "real person." That there is a genuineness, a sincerity, an openness, a transparency that rings true. What you see is what you get. That's high praise, isn't it? And yet, why should it be praiseworthy to be real? Why shouldn't it be the normal quality of all of us? It's because we've allowed gaps to open up between what we say and what we do, what we appear to be and what we are, the image of ourselves we project and the person we really are down inside.

Being a person of integrity doesn't mean that we're never weak or afraid or angry or vulnerable or self-serving at times. If that were so, we wouldn't be real people, because real people are all of those things. We sacrifice integrity, however, when we cover up what's inside and try to appear other than we are. We become false when we project a false image of ourselves.

How can we narrow that gap between appearances and reality? How can we begin to experience the power of an integrated life? I doubt if any of us can ever fully eliminate that gap in this life; I rather suspect, as C. S. Lewis affirms, that that will be the agenda in heaven. But both heaven and hell begin here. If we build our lives on illusion and appearance here, we will someday realize that we've been in hell all along without realizing it. If we work to perfect God's image within us now, developing that integrity of heart and behavior now, we'll one day discover that we've been in heaven all along. So how do we begin to live the life of heaven? How do we begin to close the gap between illusion and reality?

Well, that is certainly one of, if not the central, purposes of prayer. I don't mean just saying our prayers, but prayer as an orientation of our whole life to God— an opening of ourselves up to God, to cultivate and perfect the image of

God within us. It is in prayer that we discover the courage to be honest about who we really are inside. Our illusions are unmasked. We see where the gaps between reality and appearances are. In prayer, we find our true selves in God. If God is Ultimate Reality, then learning to orient our whole beings around that Ultimate Reality, is our true life's work. And as we make progress in that work, we discover that it is not really our work at all, but God's work in us through the Holy Spirit. We discover that we are becoming more real.

But it doesn't happen in a moment. It's the work of a lifetime, and beyond this life. It's the purpose of our creation. "Prayer unites the soul to God," said Lady Julian of Norwich, and in that union, is the true goal of our existence.

But if prayer is one means by which we unmask appearances and discern reality, the other is community. Becoming real is not something that we can do all by ourselves. We are social beings, not individual, isolated souls. Heaven is a society not a private interior state of mind. We were made for relationship. And that is why Christian community is so important— it is the place where in relationship with one another, we can grow together into that integrity of heart and life which will make it possible for us to escape illusions. Given the overwhelming pressure of our cultural bent toward appearances and illusion, I don't think it's possible for any of us to escape being sucked in unless we very intentionally become part of an alternative society where the quest for reality counteracts the world's concentration on appearances. And that's really what the Church is— we're a society dedicated to becoming what we were created to be. Real people. People of integrity. By committing ourselves to such a shared goal, we take responsibility for one another's growth. John Wesley had a particularly lovely phrase for this: he called it "watching over one another's souls in love."

Becoming real isn't easy; it takes courage

and honesty and perseverance, and a great deal of charity. But as we give ourselves to the task of learning to distinguish between appearances and reality, we will discover that we are becoming real ourselves. And that will be heaven.