

June 25, 2006
1 Samuel 15:34-16:13
First Parish Church
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Matters of the Heart

Sometimes, the kingdom of God is like the young who point out when our hearts are focused on matters that don't matter.

This week, Myrtis Fritzson sent me this story she came across.

Last week I took my children to a restaurant. My six-year-old son asked if he could say grace. As we bowed our heads he said, "God is good, God is great. Thank you for the food, and I would even thank you more if Mom gets us ice cream for dessert. And Liberty and justice for all! Amen!"

Along with the laughter from the other customers nearby I heard a woman remark, "That's what's wrong with this country. Kids today don't even know how to pray. Asking God for ice cream! Why, I never!"

Hearing this my son burst into tears and asked me, "Did I do it wrong? Is God mad at me?"

As I held him and assured him that he had done a terrific job and God was certainly not mad at him, an elderly gentleman approached the table. He winked at my son and said, "I happen to know that God thought that was a great prayer."

"Really?" my son asked.

"Cross my heart," the man replied. Then in a theatrical whisper he added (indicating the woman whose remark had started the whole thing), "Too bad she never asks God for ice cream. A

little ice cream is good for the soul sometimes."

Naturally, I bought my kids ice cream at the end of the meal. My son stared at his for a moment and then did something I will remember for the rest of my life. He picked up his sundae and without a word, walked over and placed it in front of the woman. With a big smile he told her, "Here, this is for you. Ice cream is good for the soul sometimes; and my soul is good already."

God often works through the small and seemingly insignificant.

- In a little boy hoping for ice cream.
- In the tiny mustard seed which grows so proportionately large
- In a shepherd boy who will become a great king

In what looks to us as inconsequential, God often sees great potential.

You probably remember various parts of David's story. But let's begin today with a Reader's Digest Condensed version of his saga.

David was:

- Great grandson of Ruth and Boaz
- Grandson of Obed
- The 8th son of Jesse
- The shepherd boy
- Soothing musician in Saul's court
- Slayer of Goliath

- Friend of Jonathan
- King of Israel
- Street dancer when the ark of the covenant enters Jerusalem
- Mighty warrior

Yet, there are also deeply troubling parts to David's story. He ...

- Took a woman (Bathsheba) who didn't belong to him
- Then, put out a hit on Bathsheba's husband, Uriah
- Was rebuked by the prophet Nathan for killing Uriah

David was...

- husband to many wives and concubines (Wouldn't it be interesting to hear his story from their perspective.)
- Father to many sons, who often grieved his heart through their misdeeds, revolts and violence
- An old man when he appointed his son Solomon (one of his younger sons) to be the next king.

One other thing traditionally attributed to David is the Psalms, in all their celebration and pathos, which is a reflection of his own life.

James B. Naylor wrote this light verse about David and Solomon.

*King David and King Solomon
Led merry, merry lives,
With many, many lady friends
And many, many wives;
But when old age crept over them,
With many, many qualms,
King Solomon wrote the Proverbs
And King David wrote the Psalms.*

Today, we begin at the beginning of David's story. We meet David as a

young shepherd boy- a seeming nobody, who God claims is somebody, in fact the somebody that God chooses to be the next king of Israel.

When the prophet Samuel comes to Jesse looking for a king among Jesse's sons, as you might expect, they begin with the oldest. At first, when Samuel looks on Eliab, he believes he has found the Lord's anointed. We would be inclined to trust Samuel. He is the great prophet of the Lord. He is known as the seer – the one who has a special way of seeing things from God's perspective. Yet, in this case even the great seer has faulty vision.

God says, "Do not look at his appearance or on the height of his stature....Mortals look on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart." This is not a sentimental reference. It means God looks at the inner person, at the soul.

After Eliab come Abinadab and Shammah and the other sons, but none of them are the one either. It is not clear exactly why God is rejecting them. I suspect it is not because they are bad people, but simply a matter that they are not the one. They do not have the gifts for this particular task. It is not what they are called to.

Then comes the shepherd boy. We've been told not to look on outward appearances. Yet, with an ironic twist, the first thing we learn is that David has beautiful eyes and is handsome. God has also seen his heart and found that he is the one.

In a patriarchal culture, like the Hebrews isn't it interesting and odd that it's the

youngest son who is the chosen one? This is not the only story in the Hebrew Scriptures where that is the case. Think also of Joseph and Jacob. In these stories it is the “underdog,” the younger, easily overlooked, son who is chosen by God. I suspect this is a reflection of Israel’s own perception of itself as a small nation in the face of the mighty nations around it. They may be small, they may be young, but God has chosen them.

However, this seemingly too young and ill prepared young man, may not be so ill prepared as we might first think. When you consider the work of a shepherd you realize that David has been learning much in his time out in the fields, keeping watch over his flock.

The shepherd boy,

- who cared for his sheep so they would be calm enough to lie down in green pastures,
- who led them to still waters,
- who guarded them with his sling shot against wild animals, (which will become very important in next week’s story about Goliath)
- who anointed the sheep’s faces with oil to fight off insects,
- and who finally brought them back home safe,

is the one that God has chosen. God has seen the ways he cares for the sheep, God knows the matters of David’s heart, and so God now anoints David to be the next shepherd of the nation of Israel.

So, when God looks at the matters of our hearts, at what is going on in our souls, how is God claiming us for ministry in the world?

About ten years ago a middle-aged man, Jim, came to worship at the church I was serving in Phoenix. He told me he had not grown up in the church. In fact, he had not been attending church as an adult. However, he had recently moved with his family from New York City to Phoenix. He moved into the neighborhood where the church was. Driving by one day, he noticed the church and felt strangely drawn to visit us.

Jim stayed. His heart was searching and pondering. His heart was warmed by a safe place to explore. About a year later, I had the privilege to baptize Jim.

Jim found work with an outplacement agency, helping people who were losing their employment to explore new possibilities. He spent a great deal of time looking at personality types and helping people to understand themselves well so that they could find work that matched their gifts and their callings.

Jim began to talk with me about spiritual types and then led a six-week class at the church on personality and spiritual types, especially as they relate to people’s ministries in their work settings.

Jim is now in his late fifties. He has a wife, a young adult daughter, and another daughter just entering college. Many people would expect Jim to be making retirement plans.

But something very different is happening to Jim. I haven’t talked with Jim since I moved. Out of the blue, I received a call from him this last week. He wanted to tell me that he is applying to seminary. The matters of his heart have kept tugging at him.

It's a wonderful age contrast to David isn't it? Kings should be wise, older men and yet the story says God selects the young David. Some might expect that seminary students should be young and unencumbered and yet here is this wiser, older man feeling called to a focused exploration of the ways of the spirit. God does have a wonderful sense of humor!

So, when God looks at the matters of our hearts, at what is going on in our souls, how is God choosing us for ministry in the world? Where is God's humor coming to play in our lives?

Introduction to the Scripture

Over the next couple of months we will be following the story of David, through 1 & 2 Samuel. This story line is key to an understanding of the Hebrew people and to the New Testament's proclamation that Jesus is of the house and lineage of David.

The books, 1 & 2 Samuel, are named after the great prophet Samuel,

- who was the son of Hannah and Elkanah,
- who heard God calling in the night
- who has been instrumental in Israel's transition to its first monarchy, under king Saul.

However, things are not going well with Saul's leadership. God has now rejected Saul, and there needs to be a transition to a new king. God tells Samuel to find the next king among the sons of Jesse.

Some scholars believe this passage serves as a prelude to the whole saga of David. They think that the original story of David begins with the next story in 1 Samuel where David plays his lyre in Saul's court and soothes the trouble king. In that story it appears that Saul, who was Israel's first king, is choosing David as the next king. However, today's story sets forth the theological conviction that it is really God who has chosen David to be the next king of Israel.