

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ  
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost- July 15, 2007

Scripture lessons: I Samuel 15:34 to 16:13 & I Corinthians 1:26-31

GOD AT WORK

Last Sunday we started a summertime journey into the Biblical stories of David. We recalled that with the exception of Jesus, David's the most prominent figure in the whole Bible. We saw that the Scriptures present him as a man "after God's own heart", a man that God not only loved, as God loves all of us, but a man that God *liked*.

God liked him *not* because he was so saintly- he was far from that- but because he was so *alive*. God liked him not just because he was so alive, but because he was alive *with* God. Many times David fought with God, forgot God, or turned away from God, but David was never *indifferent* to God. Even when he was at his worst- and his worst was very, very bad- David still was engaged with God. He struggled constantly to come to terms with what God was doing in his life. As he did, he awakened again and again to the depth of God's commitment to him.

Today's David story in I Samuel 15 and 16 begins with another Biblical character, King Saul. Saul was *not* a man "after God's own heart", but God *had* chosen him to be Israel's first king. The people of Israel had insisted on having a king just like the other nations around them and, in agreeing to it, God had chosen Saul for the throne.

But now Samuel grieves over Saul because God has decided to reject Saul as king. As Israel's first monarch, Saul has messed up too many times in ways that God's no longer willing to risk. At the end of chapter 15 it seems the whole kingship experiment in Israel will soon come to a sad end. Samuel goes to Ramah to grieve for Saul and the whole nation. What kind of future can they have after this debacle?

It's easy enough to understand Samuel's grief and his worry over what lies ahead. But what are we to make of God's approach to the whole matter? Chapter 15, verse 35, says, "The Lord was sorry he had made Saul king over Israel."

First of all, does this mean that God had made a mistake? It definitely does, in the sense that God's choice of Saul for king didn't turn out the way that God had wanted. But that's the kind of risk God continually takes with all of us free creatures that God has made.

When we exercise our freedom in ways contrary to God's way, as Saul did, things inevitably go in directions that God doesn't want. God mourns over that fact and wants us to do the same, just as Jesus taught us in one of his beatitudes at the start of his Sermon on the Mount- "Blessed are those who mourn," Jesus said.

We're blessed when we mourn with God because when we do, we do with our grief the same thing God does with God's grief. We use it *not* as an excuse to mope around or slack off or give up. Instead, we use it as a reason to fire up again in our determination to do everything we can to get things moving once more in God's direction. That's exactly what God does now with the sorrow God feels over the way things turned out with Saul.

The Lord quickly gets back to work with a new choice for Israel's throne. God calls on Samuel to get busy with his role in putting the new king in place. God tells him, "Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons" (16:1).

Samuel, however, isn't quite ready to move ahead with God on this. He's worried now about his own skin. In the story before this one, Samuel had been the one God had sent to tell Saul that God was rejecting him as king. Samuel's afraid that if Saul gets wind of Samuel on the road with a horn of oil over his shoulder, it won't sit well. Samuel says bluntly, "If Saul hears of it, he'll kill me" (16:2).

God is unfazed and suggests a cover to help quiet Samuel's fear. Maybe a small deception will help throw Saul off track. "Take a heifer with you, Samuel- one you can use to make a sacrifice in Bethlehem. Invite Jesse and his boys to it and, as part of that, I'll show you which one to anoint" (16:2b-3). It's interesting to note that God's apparently unconcerned about getting the divine hands a bit dirty with some creative misdirection. If that's what it takes to calm Samuel down, to get him moving on what needs to be done, God's ready to work with it.

Finally, Samuel starts to move. He goes and does in Bethlehem as God has said, and gathers Jesse and his sons for the sacrifice. The first of Jesse's boys that Samuel meets is the oldest one, Eliab. Samuel's very impressed at first sight with this young man, especially by his height. The Bible doesn't say, but maybe Eliab's well-known as the star center on Bethlehem's basketball team. More to the point, it's likely that Samuel has forgotten that when Saul first was chosen to be king the thing that most impressed people about him at first, too, was the fact that he stood, literally, head and shoulders above everyone else (I Samuel 9:2).

But this time God's not impressed with Eliab, the tall man, as a kingly candidate. The Lord 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 mortals see; they look on outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (16:7). This same story later makes clear that when God's at work an appealing outward appearance doesn't *disqualify* people from God's service. But the story's keen to emphasize that good looks are never a prime or decisive consideration in God's reckoning with us.

It's an obvious point, but one still worth making, I think, especially in a culture like ours where external appearance often seems to be given such exaggerated worth. To God "the heart" is what matters most. It doesn't have to be a sinless heart, as we remembered last week, but a heart that's alive *with* God.

And so the parade of Jesse's sons continues. Which one should be anointed? After Eliab, Abinidab and Shammah come before Samuel, and Samuel declares of each of them, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." The story begins with the rejection of Saul, and now seven of Jesse's sons are rejected. The names of the last four aren't even mentioned. We're only told that they're rejected.

Samuel becomes bewildered. Has he missed some key element in God's message to him? Has he come to the wrong town or the wrong family? He scrapes up another possibility. "Jesse, do you have another son?" Yes, he does- it's his eighth, the youngest, the heretofore nameless kid brother. If we understand the significance of the number seven in Israel's culture at that time, we can see how very surprising this turn of events is.

To the Israelites of Samuel's day, the number seven suggested wholeness, harmony, or perfection. According to the common expectation brought to this story, the one God would choose, as the next king, would surely then come from among the first seven. But no, there's an eighth son, and the Hebrew word used to refer to him is *haqqaton*.

*Haqqaton* means "baby brother" and at that time "baby brother" meant nothing special. Today, we might have a sentimental attachment to the baby of a family, but Israelites in Jesse's time didn't. Jesse hadn't even considered presenting his youngest son to Samuel. "Let that boy keep tending the sheep," he thought. That's what he was good for.

But Samuel insists, "Go get him! We won't have the sacrifice until he gets here." So the story grinds to a halt as Samuel, Jesse, his seven sons, and all of Bethlehem wait for the unexpected eighth son.

He arrives and the story immediately gives more irony. Remember that Samuel's under strict orders not to pay attention to outward appearance. Yet the very next line after the kid brother appears is, "Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome."

God discounts attractive outward appearance, but good looks don't *disqualify* anyone before God. They're neither here nor there as far as God's concerned, but the story mentions them, I suppose, because they still mean a great deal to us. It seems we can't help but pay attention to

them, whether for good or for ill and because of that the story gives a heads-up. Later on when so many people become attracted to David it won't necessarily be because they love that his heart's so alive with God. It might be that they just like the fact that he looks good.

In any case, right then and there, Samuel hauls out the horn of oil and pours it over David's head. The young shepherd boy is anointed to be Israel's next king. God's choice of him is definitely unexpected, but it's not the first time God has done something like this. Earlier in the Scriptures, God chooses unlikely younger ones over older ones- Abel over Cain, Jacob over Esau, Rachel over Leah, and Joseph over his brothers. Outward appearance isn't the only thing that doesn't seem to matter much when God's at work. Seniority doesn't mean much, either. God looks on *the heart*.

Looking on David's heart, God anoints him to be royalty. The oil poured over this baby brother serves as a beautiful sacrament. It's an outward sign, as we say today, of an invisible grace, a sign by which God's gracious commitment to David is made visible for all to see. The story's final verse says "the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward." The Lord of the Universe, having called David into royal work, now works to strengthen and guide him in it.

And guess what? God has done and is doing the same with all of us today.

Who are we? We're each, in some sense, the baby of the family. Each of us, whether in our eyes or someone else's, looks like the last born, the youngest one, the kid brother or sister who's completely unlikely as a candidate for royal service.

But baptism comes along and lets everyone know that this is precisely who we are. The waters of baptism pour over our heads and make visible the beauty of God's commitment to us. Through baptism, God names us as God's own and calls each of us into the splendor of God's royal family. The spirit of the Lord comes mightily on us to strengthen and guide us in the royal service that's ours as one of God's own.

There are always many ways to shrink back from this, to sink ourselves and each other into the more comfortable mire of insignificance. "Oh, I'm just a layperson." "Oh, I'm just the minister of a local church and it's not a mega-one." "Oh, I don't have enough training or experience." "I'm too old and worn out." "I don't have much money." "I'm no good with words." I'm not smart enough, talented enough, or good enough to do anything that really matters."

But that's all hogwash and God knows it. In God's eyes, each of us is David. Each of us is anointed for royal work as one of God's own sons or daughters. The very Lord of the Universe who makes, redeems, and sustains us is at work now to strengthen and guide us for our divine service.

Our looks, our religious or social status, our age, training, or experience, our ability with words, our money, our intelligence, our talent, or our present moral development- all of that's external stuff that's neither here nor there as far as God's concerned. God looks on the heart. In looking on our hearts, God sees each of us as God's royal own.

All we have to do is to be alive with God in that fact. All we need to do is keep wrestling with God in what this means for our life, with what it means to be anointed for royal service in God's reign.

Wrestling with this anointing is never easy. It wasn't for David or for David's distant son, Jesus. The spirit of the Lord comes mightily on David and he's soon catapulted into huge loads of trouble--the envy, anger, and plots of Saul, years of being hunted down and betrayed, hiding out in caves, wandering around in exile.

It was the same and worse for Jesus. The Spirit came upon him in his baptism and immediately drove him into the wilderness to be tested by Satan. Once his public ministry was launched, he faced all sorts of misunderstanding and opposition, even from among his own followers. Eventually, he ended up beaten and nailed to a cross.

But here's the crux that underlies the whole business. When God is at work in our life, which God surely is, it means that we are *significant*. It's always easier to be *insignificant* but that's not

our destiny- God won't allow it. We're anointed by God to be royalty and, as such, we're called and equipped for nothing less than royal service in God's family. This gives us big responsibilities. It means that we run into many subtle temptations and dangers.

But what a life it is! It's the life of a bunch of Davids, babies of the family that everyone overlooks at first, but who grow up to be and to wrestle passionately with God in the mighty adventures of God's own work. There's nothing better in this whole, wide world- nothing better at all. Amen.