



The New England Church Pulpit

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Seeing through God's Glasses Everyday

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1 Samuel 16.1-13

The Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Go to the house of Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons." Samuel said, "How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." And the Lord said, "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.' Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you." Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him, trembling, and said, "Do you come peaceably?" He said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord, sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they came, he looked on Jesse's son Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord." But the Lord said 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 the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen any of these." Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" Jesse said, "There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here." Jesse sent for David and brought him in. Now he was ruddy and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Then Samuel anointed him with oil in the presence of his brothers, and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.

This is one of the most fascinating scriptures in the whole of the Hebrew Bible, illustrating the belief that, while we are swayed by outward appearances, God looks beyond the surface to see deep into the mind and heart. Israel's King Saul has lost favor with God because of his wicked deeds, so God sends Samuel to choose another king from the house of Jesse of Bethlehem, the lineage of whom Jesus will be born. While Samuel is glad to be getting rid of Saul, he knows only too well that by choosing a new king, Saul will want his head on a platter. Nevertheless, God says "go," and Samuel goes.

When Samuel saw what we assume would be Jesse's oldest son, he immediately assumed this to be God's chosen. He was firstborn, tall and handsome, rugged and seemingly good material for a king. But God said "No; he doesn't have the skillset needed for the mission. Reject him." Jesse then sent his second son, perhaps the next oldest, but God shook the divine head and said "keep looking." This went on until all the sons had been paraded past Samuel with no affirmation from God.

Finally, Jesse admits that the runt of the litter, as it were, was out tending the sheep, a nasty, arduous, an menial task, implying that David had little to offer by way of kingly attributes. So scrawny, short, and ruddy David, whose handsome face and bright blue eyes commended him for some physical comeliness, and God said "yes; this is the man." David went on to become Israel's quintessential king, even though he was not perfect, and screwed things up, literally, along the way. Nonetheless, God looks at people differently than we look at people. And God uses even screw-ups for holy purpose, and we best keep that in mind, with David as prime example.

Author Anthony De Mello illustrates the point with this well-known parable. I don't know if this actually happened, but I do know that it is true. Once upon a time, long, long ago, there was a monastery of some fame. The monastery was well-known for the wisdom of the monks and for the respite it offered for those traveling and those in hardships. Here people would come to pray, to sit at the feet of the monks to hear the scriptures imparted for their edification, and otherwise be renewed in their spiritual journey.

As time passed, and the monks began to wane in their scholarly acumen, the monastery began to fall on difficult days. The monks began to point fingers at one another as the reason the monastery was in decline; they fought with one another in unfriendly ways, and otherwise became very disagreeable with one another. The monastery lost its reputation for being a place for renewal, and eventually no one came to it.

The archbishop heard of the situation and came to check it out, at which point he observed first-hand the squabbling and nasty, petty bickering that had undermined their good work. When the archbishop addressed them, he thanked them for their years of service, and, while they thought he was going to close down the monastery, he surprised them by saying that God had told him in a vision that one of them was the risen Christ come to live among them. Of course, this seemed impossible, but the notion of one of their brothers with whom they quarreled could be the one God had sent to revitalize the monastery. Now, instead of seeing a perturbing, cantankerous colleague, they began to see each other through the eyes of God, treating each other with respect and dignity. And that, of course, changed the whole attitude of the monastic culture. Once again they began to thrive. New monks came to replace the tired ones and people once again flocked to the monastery for spiritual renewal.

What would the world be like if we were to see each person we meet as being Christ incarnate, come back to live among us? What if we were to reframe each cantankerous, unlikeable person we encountered as the living Christ? What if each time there was someone in need we were to respond as if they were Jesus? After all, Jesus said that when we have done any good deed toward another, we have done it to him, as if that person were Jesus himself.

I think about my irritation with a store clerk who doesn't know where the raisins are any more than I do, and because I'm in a hurry, show my irritation with a tone of voice that will let him know how I feel. And what about that neighbor who is sometimes a bit annoying, or maybe a lot annoying, and consider that her nastiness may be due to a lifetime of problems with her wayward children who pay no attention to her? The colleague at work may be stand-offish and so we stand off and don't speak, when maybe he's just incredibly shy and would like to have a smile or a hello from time to time. We can learn a lot about God by engaging others, even those who look on the outward appearance to be far from divine. But our eyes don't work like God's eyes; and the glasses through which we see others are made of our prescription so we see only what we want to see. What if we were to wear glasses God has given us?

I know this is like preaching to the choir, but it's important for all of us to be reminded with regularity that everyone we meet may be the Christ in ordinary clothes. To see through God's glasses changes the perspective, heightens the awareness, raises the possibilities of conversation, and levels the playing field, as it were.

This week I was interviewed by Channel 5 news along with one of the young men who had attended the Youth Outlook program here at the church for LGBT high school kids. He told about the attitude of people 20 years ago when he realized that he was gay, but had no one to tell without fear of recrimination or even bodily harm. In anticipation of today's Parade, Reporter Chris Hush interviewed Peter Thaddeus who commented on how difficult it was to come to terms with his orientation when there was little support. And of all places, he said, a church was the last place he would expect to find a support group where he could be himself. But he did and is now taking his place in society to help others.

People looked at him years ago like they sometimes look at scripture: what you see is what you want to see, and what you judge according to personal standards isn't always the way God judges. This young man has found his way in the world because this congregation was willing to take a stand against the majority of 20 years ago and offer to hundreds of young high school students these past years a safe place to explore. I'm proud of this church who was willing to put on God's glasses, putting on blinders to the opposition, and shatter the boundaries of prejudice. And now, two decades later, he's leading a support group for high school kids and marching in today's Parade.

May we continue to learn each day the lesson Samuel learned when he followed the calling of God to look carefully at the people around us. Treat them like a king or a queen, honor them as if they were Jesus himself, and the world will be the world God intended it. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann