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OCMC
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Inside Out
I Samuel 16:1-13

The title of my sermon is “Inside Out.” All week my mind was turning over images or illustrations to demonstrate the concept that God does not see what humans see, God looks at the heart. I briefly toyed with the idea of wearing all my clothes inside out as a thought-provoking critique of the ways in which we evaluate one another based on what we wear. In the end I decided that I needed my pockets, so you won’t have to suffer through that.

Christy and I were at a friend’s wedding reception recently where the maid of honor read for all the guests a list of criteria for husband that she and the bride had written together when they were fifteen. It included things like devastatingly handsome, tall, athletic, wealthy, just the right amount of chest hair, muscular, funny, shaggy hair, (and it went on for awhile). I won’t ask how many here have ever composed such a list. And I especially won’t ask how many of you actually found the person who fits all those criteria. It just goes to show that from a very young age, we learn to evaluate other people based on the qualities we think are important. And we assume that our criteria are the right ones.

In our passage today, the prophet Samuel is on a mission from God to find a new king for Israel. The first king, Saul, had turned out to be a disaster, and it says that “God rejected him as king” (16:1). When Israel had first demanded a king so that they could be like the other nations (8:5), Saul seemed like the right choice. He came from a wealthy family, he was handsome and young. In fact, the Bible says that “There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else” (9:1-2).

So we can understand what Samuel had in mind for the next king. Maybe he was looking for Shaquille O’Neal in sandals. But there’s another part to this story that I think explains some of Samuel’s thinking. Even though God had rejected Saul as king, it’s quite clear that *Saul* had not rejected Saul as king. Samuel was doing the most treasonous thing possible – he was looking for Saul’s replacement. You can imagine how well that would go over with a king. Kings don’t just give up power – it’s not like you serve a term and then step down. It reminds me of the cartoon characters Calvin and Hobbes, who create a secret club. As they’re discussing who will be what, Calvin declares himself president. “Fine,” says Hobbes, “I’ll be dictator-for-life.” “No wait!” Calvin says, “I want to be dictator-for-life – you can be president.”

The point is that the prophet Samuel was not just taking his good old time. He was doing something for which, if Saul found out, he would be killed. Samuel knows it dangerous, but he also knows that he has to obey God, who is telling him to find and anoint a new king from among Jesse’s sons. So it makes sense when Samuel sees the first son Eliab, and he’s tall and he’s perfect – in fact, he’s like Yao Ming in sandals. And Samuel thinks “Aha! This is the one! Now let’s do this so I can get out of here.”

But God says, “Wait- don’t look at his appearance or at how tall he is, because he’s not the one; for the Lord does not see as humans see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” So one by one all of Jesse’s sons came forward, and each time Samuel said, “No, the Lord has not chosen this one. Next!” And all seven sons come through, and then Samuel says to Jesse, “God hasn’t chosen any of these. What else have you got?”

And Jesse has to scrape the bottom of the barrel. “Well, there is one more, but he’s taking care of the sheep.” Apparently, David wasn’t even worth bringing to the king-picking ceremony. It’s likely that he was still quite young, just a boy of maybe eleven or twelve. So Jesse thought, Why bother? But Samuel says, “What are you waiting for? And I like what the KJV says: Fetch him hither! And he says, “We’re not even going to sit down until he arrives.” This is clearly not a social call, and remember that Samuel is committing treason in Saul’s eyes and he’s probably looking at his watch (or his sundial).

When David arrives, he’s not tall, but he is described as “ruddy, with beautiful eyes, and handsome.” And God says, “Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.” So “Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers” and it says that “the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.” And we know that David went on to make some serious mistakes, but overall he is known as the model of a righteous king who is obedient to God, and it is through his line that the Messiah was to come and did come.

This story should remind us of another story that has some striking similarities. There was another king who, like Saul, was reluctant to give up his power to a new king. And this king, Herod, went to the extreme of the mass killing of baby boys who might threaten his power. And just like David time after time escaped the attempts on his life by Saul, so Jesus escaped the murderous intent of King Herod.

The angels and the shepherds and the magi all recognized the importance of this baby who is born the king of the Jews. But somehow for awhile all this is forgotten and Jesus was known simply as the son of a carpenter from the town of Nazareth. But then he started calling disciples and healing people and he brought back a dead girl to life. And when he came back to his hometown everyone said “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Isn’t this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him (Mk 6:2-3).

Another time Philip had decided to follow Jesus, and he told Nathanael that he had found the one who Moses and the prophets wrote about. And Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” (Jn 1:43-46). This small-town kid from a place that everyone laughed about was an unlikely candidate for a king.

In many ways Jesus turned the concept of kingship on its head. When the people wanted to make him king by force he entered Jerusalem riding on a young donkey rather than on a trained war horse. He washed his disciples’ feet and taught them that true greatness comes in service. Rather than leading a violent overthrow of the corrupt powers, he went to his death as a political criminal, for which the sentence was crucifixion. When he was being accused before Pilate, he said, ‘My kingdom is not from

this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.’ Pilate asked him, ‘So you are a king?’ Jesus answered, ‘You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.’ (Jn 18:36-37). Jesus was mocked with a robe and a crown of thorns, and a sign was put over his head as he died, “King of the Jews.”

From all appearances, he was the least-effective king ever. He was supposed to deliver his people from their oppression, and instead he ends up giving up his life. But the resurrection changes everything. On the third day after his death, God raised Jesus to life, and his true authority as king is demonstrated once and for all. Not the kind of king who was expected, not the kind that people were used to seeing. This king has authority even over death. If there’s anything we can learn from the resurrection, it is this: appearance is nothing; God’s power is everything.

In fact, this is not only something that Jesus demonstrated; it’s something that he taught. He had harsh words for the religious leaders of his day, who liked to appear religious and righteous. Jesus saw right through them, and he said they were like tombs that are painted all nicely but that are actually full of dead bones. He used the word hypocrite, which actually refers to someone who is acting a role, as in a theater. Pretending to be something one is not never pays off.

Before God, we’re all inside out. I told you earlier that I had been looking for illustrations of this concept. Once again I’m forced to appeal to my favorite TV show. On the Simpsons, Lisa is the sensitive 8-year-old who is consistently brilliant but still a little girl. As they walk through a busy urban market she spots a number of rabbit carcasses hanging on a string in a window, already skinned. With deep concern she asks her mother Marge, “Mom, are those bunnies dead?” Marge replies, “Uh, no sweetie, they’re just sleeping...inside out.” Before God, we all sleep inside out. We all do everything we do inside out. All the guts and the things that we’re composed of, the very depths of who we are, it’s all out in the open to God, even the things we like to hide from other people. As the saying goes: “You can fool all of the people some of the time, and you can even fool some of the people all of the time, but you can’t fool all of the people all of the time.” To that I would add, “and you can’t fool God any of the time.” Jesus tells his followers, when you pray or fast or give to those in need, do it in secret – that’s where the true reward from God is.

We’ve all been evaluated all of our lives – in school, on job interviews, even in romances. We all know what that’s like. And we probably all know that sinking feeling when you just aren’t good enough according to someone’s standards. We are deemed not smart enough, not rich enough, not talented enough, not attractive enough, not loveable enough.

Well, I’ve got some good news for you. The church is a place where, if we’re faithful to who we’re called to be, the standard for judgment is the same as God’s – everyone has value and everyone is gifted. When it comes to God, we are all on equal footing – we all come as sinners who have taken God’s good gifts and messed them up. And when we receive God’s forgiveness through Jesus Christ and join the community of his followers, we’re still all on equal footing. We all are given gifts by the Spirit to unify

the church and to build up the body of believers. You are gifted, even if others don't recognize it, even if you don't recognize it.

The apostle Paul writes to his young fellow minister Timothy, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity" (1 Tim 4:12). Who we are on the inside will come out, and it will either serve as an example to others, or as a stumbling block. "Set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity."

If we're honest with ourselves, we recognize that we're not just being evaluated by others, based on how we dress or look or how much money we make or how talented we are. More often than not, we're the ones who evaluate others. Like Samuel, who thought, "This guy's not tall enough to be king," we all have ideas in our minds about who is a successful person and who's not. And when we admit that, it's amazing how convicted we should be by these words: "People judge each other from the appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

One final point before I close: from time to time I mention my little nephew in my sermons – ok, like every time I preach. But you think I'm bad now, just wait until I have my own kids. In my defense, I talk about him a lot less than my mom does (as Christy can testify); compared to her, I have a very mild case. But the reason I do is because I think children provide a wealth of insight into knowing our own selves and into knowing God. My one-year-old nephew, who lives in Indonesia, has latched onto the Indonesian word for "I want," which my brother claims he repeats incessantly. I'm sure this kind of behavior is nothing new to you parents. The thing is, we don't expect our children to act immediately like adults. But we hope eventually that they will. We don't give up on them because we recognize that they have potential to become civilized human beings.

I think we can learn something valuable from this. I'm not saying that we should think of or treat those around us like children. My point is that we must learn to see all those around us not for their shortcomings but for their potential. We'll never be able to look at people's hearts in the way that God does. But God, who sees us from the inside out, extends grace and forgiveness even when we don't deserve it. Let us pray that we can do the same for one another.

Our loving and merciful God, thank you for creating us, knowing us completely, and forgiving us. Help us to be a little more like you in the way that we see one another. We thank you for Jesus, who came to us as a humble king and a servant and was crucified and rose again. Give us strength to take up our crosses and follow him. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit we pray, Amen.