

Sermon: "Looks Can Be Deceiving"
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First Presbyterian Church, Kissimmee, Florida

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1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

34 Then Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul. 35 Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.

16:1 The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. 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." 2 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.' 3 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." 4 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?" 5 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.

16:6 When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD'S anointed is now before the LORD." 7 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." 8 Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one." 9 Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one."

10 Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen any of these."

11 Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he 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."

12 He sent 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."

13 Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

SUSAN BOYLE

Looks can be deceiving.

Perhaps the best modern example of this was the debut of a singer named Susan Boyle.

She was singing on the TV show, Britain's Got Talent.

When Susan walked on stage, everyone just "knew" at a glance that she was a "loser" thrown in for comic effect. She seemed a bit tongue tied in her initial conversation with the judges.

In fact you might say she was on the quirky side.

And then there was the way she looked.

Her appearance was scruffy, to put it mildly.

But, looks can be deceiving.

Her powerful performance of the song, "I Had a Dream" amazed the audience.

They applauded wildly.

The judges of that contest were literally in tears.

And the video of her performance went viral on social media within hours.

Susan's story is an exception to the rule.

Most of the time we judge people by their looks.

We don't get the chance to really see what they are like on the inside.

But, today's lesson reminds us that God judges in a different way.

The Lord "looks on the heart."

SAUL HAS TO GO

Our story begins with Samuel grieving over King Saul. Saul had disobeyed God and so Saul had to go.

Samuel knew that this change in leadership would be difficult, so he worried about the future of his country. And he was sad that the man he had anointed as Israel's first king would soon be deposed.

You'll remember from last week's lesson that Samuel warned the elders of Israel that it wasn't a good idea to anoint anyone king. God was their king.

If they anointed an earthly king, their sons and daughters would be drafted. Taxes would be raised. In the end the rich would get richer and the poor would get poorer.

But, the elders didn't listen.
They wanted a king.
They wanted to be like everyone else.

They wanted the security of someone who could lead them into battle against their enemies.

So God punished them by giving them what they wanted.
But, God was still involved in the process.
God led Samuel to anoint Saul as the first king of Israel.

Saul was literally head and shoulders above everyone else in the land. And Saul was good looking.

Saul was reluctant to lead his people at first.
But, once Saul got a taste of power it went to his head.

Saul thought that because he was king he didn't have to obey anyone's commands, even God's commands.

And that's when God told Samuel that Saul had to go. God said,

"How long are you going to grieve about Saul's downfall?
It's time to move on. Let's go and anoint Israel's next king.

I already have someone in mind.
Go see Jesse who lives in Bethlehem.
One of his sons will make a fine king.”

THE COVER STORY

Now Samuel is not so sure about this.
Saul might be a bad king, but he’s still king.
And he will be quite willing to kill Samuel if he has the gall to anoint someone else king.

So God gives Samuel a cover story. God said,

“Just tell them that you’re there to make a sacrifice to the Lord.

No one will be suspicious.
Making sacrifices is what prophets do.”

So, Samuel rounded up a heifer to sacrifice and made his way into Bethlehem.

The elders in Bethlehem were a bit afraid of Samuel. They knew he was a powerful prophet, and they actually trembled when they learned he had come to their little town.

The elders asked, “Do you come in peace?”

And Samuel replied,

“Nothing to worry about. I’ve just come to make a sacrifice to the Lord.
And I want to invite Jesse and his sons to be my special guests.”

CHOOSING A KING

While the sacrificial barbecue was going on, Samuel looked at the eldest of Jesse’s sons, Eliab and thought, “This guy looks great. Surely he’s the one God is going to pick to be the next king.”

But, that’s when God warned Samuel not to judge a book by its cover.

You look on the outside.
I have the advantage of looking on the inside.

Looks can be deceiving.
Keep looking.

So, Samuel had seven of Jesse's sons come before him.

They all had GQ looks.
They were big, strong guys with muscular bodies and intelligent eyes.

But, none of Jesse's seven sons met God's approval.
And so Samuel asked Jesse,

"Do you have any more sons?"

And Jesse said,
"Well, there is the youngest son.
He's out watching the sheep while we make this sacrifice.
Somebody has to watch the sheep."

And Samuel replied,
"Bring him here.
The party can't start until I've seen all your sons."

And so they go out into the field and bring back David.

David is shorter than the other brothers, but he's good looking too.

All of Jesse's sons are good looking.
They're just that kind of family.

But, God looked at David and saw more than a good looking teen.

God saw someone who had a godly heart.
And God selected David to be Israel's next king.

So the old prophet Samuel anoints the youngest of Jesse's sons to be the next king of Israel.

And then the prophet leaves town.
There is more to come in this story.

UNLIKELY CHOICES

This is a recurring theme in the Bible.
God always seems to choose the most unlikely candidates to do the work of the kingdom.

For example, God preferred a childless couple of senior citizens to found his mighty nation instead of the many fertile younger couples that must have been available.

God choose the schemer Jacob over his slightly older brother Esau.

God choose the youngest of Jacob's children, Joseph to save and lead his people during a time of famine.

And, of course, eventually God will surprise the world with a Messiah, an impoverished little boy who is born in Bethlehem. He will be born born not far from where David was anointed by Samuel.

Of course this Messiah was not the Messiah that the people expected or wanted.

They still wanted someone who would lead them in battle and vanquish their foes.

They still wanted an earthly king.

In that regard, Jesus was a disappointment.
Instead of leading others into battle, Jesus sacrificed himself for others on the cross.

It looked like he was totally defeated.

But, as we have said several times today,
"Looks can be deceiving."

Through his sacrifice God's salvation came into the world.

Sometimes the kingdom of God comes in dramatic fashion.

But, the Bible suggests that more often the kingdom comes in ways that are small and not even noticed by most people.

SEED FAITH

The New Testament lesson for today from Mark makes that same point.
(Mark 4:26-34)

Jesus is teaching people about the kingdom of God.

He says that the kingdom of God often comes in ways that are unexpected.

And then he gives a couple of brief parables to suggest just how surprising the kingdom can be.

When the kingdom comes, it's like somebody goes out and scatters seed all over the place. The seed takes root and produces a great harvest.

And people are dumbfounded to see such a great harvest in such unlikely places.

But, they are grateful for what they receive.
That's what the kingdom is like.

Or, to give another example, the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed.

How big is a mustard seed?
Not that big.

But, amazingly when you plant it grows into a bush that provides shelter for the birds.

That's what the kingdom is like.

When it comes to the kingdom of God, looks can be deceiving.
A harvest can come from the most unlikely of circumstances.

Now many didn't understand what Jesus was saying.

The parables of Jesus were a mystery to most folks.
But, Jesus used those parables as a way to instruct his disciples.

And I think those parables instruct disciples even today.
We cannot judge the effectiveness of ministry by looks alone.
Looks can be deceiving.

THE HEART OF A CHURCH

We still look for the kingdom of God in those that are powerful and impressive.

We often evaluate the effectiveness of churches and their leaders by the numbers. What are the first questions people ask about a church?

How many members does that church have?
How big is their church building?
What is the church's budget for the year?

And when it comes to the pastor they ask,

What does the pastor look like?
Is he young and vibrant?
Does he preach a message that makes everyone feel good?

We look on the outside.

But, God looks on the heart.
The effectiveness of any church or leader is measured not by success but by faithfulness.

This past week there was a discussion on the seminary website about why churches decline and close.

One executive said that we have to face the fact that some churches decline and close because they make the wrong choices.

They keep picking the wrong pastor.
They defer maintenance on the church building until its too late.
The don't spend enough on mission.

The list went on and on.

She was right of course.

Churches and pastors do make bad choices.

And sometimes those bad choices do eventually cause those churches to close.

She made a point of saying that she didn't want to be harsh and disrespectful.

But the more she wrote, the more what she said did seem harsh.

What was she leaving out?

Why was I so uncomfortable with what she was saying?

A response to her statement by another pastor helped me understand my misgivings.

THE SACRIFICIAL CHURCH

Our unfaithfulness is only part of the story when it comes to small, struggling churches.

Sometimes the church literally gives her life in ministry to others.

This author talked about congregations in my old neck of the woods, the coal towns of Appalachia.

She said these places have been destroyed by outside greed.

She said that they were places of economic and environmental exile.
(That's all true by the way.)

But, she went on to say that there was one group that had not left this seemingly god-forsaken place, the church. Small churches in the coal fields struggle to care for the overwhelming needs of those truly left behind.

And their acts of ministry go unnoticed by many.

Their blood, sweat and tears have literally gone into the building of their small churches.

But, because of economic downturn in these areas, these churches will eventually close.

They will not have the money to pay a preacher.

They will not have the money to maintain the building.

All their members will eventually move away.

But, these churches won't rust out.

They will burn out.

These churches will give their lives for the sake of others.

Looking at these churches from the outside, they seem kind of sad.

But, God doesn't look on the outside.

God looks on the heart.

And we know that just as Jesus took up a cross and gave his life for the world so we too are called to take up a cross and follow in that same path of service.

Sometimes we'll be successful.

Sometimes we won't be successful.

But, success is not the measure of ministry.

Faithfulness is the measure of ministry.

And the seeds planted in faithful ministry will one day grow into trees of hope, a place of shelter for those who need it most.

The Bible tells us that even the smallest act of ministry can do great things in God's kingdom.

MINISTRY IN CUBA

Tonight we are going to hear from a young Cuban minister.

He has been serving very small churches in difficult circumstances for many years.

At one time it looked like the Presbyterian Church in Cuba might cease to exist.

And today conditions are still difficult.
The churches are prevented from doing any evangelism.
They face extreme poverty and struggle to care for the people in very simple, basic ways.

They dream of doing more, but their circumstances keep them from doing what they need to do.
Looking on the outside you might say,
"This seems hopeless."

But, looks can be deceiving.
Godly hearts can overcome even the most daunting of circumstances.

I believe mustard seeds of faith are being planted in Cuba.
And I believe these seeds will grow into something big.

I believe that the kingdom of God is on the move.
Hearts and minds are being changed.

And I believe mustard seeds of faith are being planted in our Presbytery
and in our church.

God is on the move in our lives.
God is leading us forward.

The Spirit of the Lord is coming upon all of us, young and old. That Spirit is giving us a heart for God and a hope that will not be defeated by anything.

Forget about all the naysayers who suggest that the church is the bearer of old news instead of the bearer of good news.

Listen instead to the call of God.
God's not finished with us yet.
There's still more work to do in the kingdom.

Remember.
Looks can be deceiving.
God is at work in our lives despite evidence to the contrary.

Have faith.

Have hope.

Plant seeds.

Amen.