

## WHO IS NOT HERE?

Ken and I were members of the Lions Club in Shawano for some time. At a meeting we were attending, a Lions member from another town told the story about a resident there. We'll call the resident Dave.

Dave could be seen walking around town, stooped over, his clothes mismatched, head down constantly. When he would attempt to cross the street, horns blared at him because he would just walk out into the roadway, oblivious. No doubt the townspeople thought him a homeless person, wandering the streets, and didn't pay much attention to him.

The prophet, Samuel, had accepted God's call at an early age. His job was to point out corruption at that time and to eventually anoint the first kings of Israel. Samuel was God's change-agent.

In our Scripture reading today, Saul is the current king of Israel. God has regretted making Saul king of Israel and has decided he doesn't want him as king any longer. Saul had begun to do his own thing instead of following God's wishes.

But when Samuel gets marching orders from God to anoint a new king, his first answer is "No." (How many times in the Bible have we heard persons tell God, "No, I don't want to?") In Samuel's case, Saul is still king and Samuel feels that if Saul hears that he is picking out a king to replace him, Saul will kill him. So God, in his abounding wisdom, gives Samuel a cover story to use for his visit to Bethlehem, to the home of Jesse. Jesse has about eight sons from whom Samuel is to choose the next king of Israel.

At Jesse's home, Jesse begins to introduce his sons, starting with the oldest one. "This is Eliab," Jesse said, proudly patting the tallest of his boys on the shoulder. Eliab was strong and muscular. He smiled confidently at Samuel and Samuel thought, "Surely this is the one God means." But God spoke within Samuel's heart, saying, "Don't be so quick to judge someone by how they look, Samuel, for this is not the one. Remember, you may look on the outside, but I look on the inside. It's what is in a person's heart that matters to me."

One by one each of Jesse's sons were introduced, and each time Samuel said, "No, this isn't the one God has chosen either." After they had all been rejected, Samuel said to Jesse, "You must have other sons, for none of these young men is the one God wants me to find."

"Well," said Jesse, looking down at the ground, "there is one other, my youngest son, David." At this, the brothers began to laugh quietly and nudge each other. Surely Samuel didn't think their little brother, who didn't have much status in the family, who spent all day making up songs on his harp, was the one God had chosen to do something special. "He is just a boy," Jesse continued, "and we left him at home to watch the sheep." "Send for him," Samuel said. "I'll wait."

After a while, Jesse came back, leading a messy-haired, ruddy-faced boy by the shoulders. "And this," he sighed, "is David." Samuel looked into the bright youthful eyes of David and deep down and all around heard God say, "Anoint him, this is the one!" As his brothers stared in amazement, Samuel poured the oil from his horn onto David's head, and the spirit of the Lord came over David, and he was filled with a purpose from God for the rest of his life.

It is so natural, so human of us, to look at others with a critical eye. It is evident in our young daughters and granddaughters who think they're fat when they're not, when having a pimple on their face makes them want to stay inside, when what their friends think is more important than belief in themselves. Print and audio media have them believing that they need to be perfect to be of any value.

As the people who saw Dave in my opening story, or the reaction of Samuel himself, how often do we judge persons because of the way they are dressed, how they walk, how they talk, the fact that they're from a mixed marriage? We do this before we've even gotten to connect with the person.

"The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

Several years ago Susan Boyle, a Scottish woman, appeared on the equivalent show of "America's Idol." When she came out onto the stage, a hush fell over the audience – an embarrassed hush. To the audience and judges, here was someone who did not exemplify the looks or speech of a "star." After a few notes of singing, she stunned the audience, the audience who had been judging her according to criteria for "stars." Their whole perception and judgments were challenged. Wayne Dyer, a self-help writer and speaker, once said, "Judgments prevent us from seeing the good that lies beyond appearances."

How often do we judge persons because of their weight, lack of teeth, mental or physical abilities, age, race, ethnicity, or they are not 'just not like us?'

"Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature. . .  
for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward

appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

What happens when any of these persons comes through our doors?

It's been many years since the son of David – Jesus – chose to become an outsider and identify with the least in his society, but judging people on the surface continues and is common today. The characteristics I described above influence our acceptance of one another. Each of us has a little Samuel on the inside, and we need to constantly evaluate who the outsider is for us.

The Lord looks on the heart, not on outward appearance.

David was chosen by God to become king even though he was the last, littlest, and least among his older and more experienced brothers. But God uses the least to accomplish the most. God has always been on the side of the less fortunate. We were created in the image of God, and that is how God wants us to see the people we encounter.

Remember Dave at the beginning of this sermon, the seemingly homeless gentleman? The man who told this story inquired about Dave and found out that Dave had cataracts in both eyes and could not see well. That's why his clothes were mismatched and he could not get a job. He had a small apartment without water and used the bathroom at the library. The storyteller took this matter to the local Lions Club who found a doctor to perform the cataract surgery for Dave. Dave gained confidence again, has new clothes, has applied for a job and is looking for a new apartment with running water. Dave has been transformed.

The motto of the Lions clubs is “We Serve.” That is also an essential practice of the church. Hospitality is a mark of Christian discipleship, of a Christian community, an expression of seeing ourselves as willing to serve. It's been said by many here that when they came to Emanuel, they felt welcomed. Ken and I surely did.

Hospitality is welcoming strangers in our midst: the single Mom, the single woman or man, the mixed couple, the person who looks lost and may be seeking some hope.

God has a vision of inclusion for our congregation and community of welcoming all people. As a community of faith, it's important to ask the question, “Who is not here?” In today's scripture, Samuel asks that very question of Jesse: “Are all your sons here?” The answer was, “No.” David

the youngest was caring for the sheep. In our reading from John, Jesus says that all are included in his sheep pen. Are there people outside our building who may be searching for a church home, who may want to find a place where they will be welcome, no matter who they are, where they come from, or what limitations they may have?

Our prayer is that anyone who walks through our doors will find a full embrace and welcome into the community. Our prayer is that we will be blessed by and be a blessing to those beautiful human beings who walk through the open heart and doors of the church of Jesus Christ.

Amen.