

"Things Aren't As They Seem"
Andy Wing, 6.14.09

We've all been lectured in our lives from our teachers, preachers and parents, "Don't judge a book by its cover" or "It's what's on the inside that counts." Still, it is also difficult to keep ourselves from judging. Our story from Samuel today reminds us of the difference between judging based on what we see versus what God sees. We watch as each of Jesse's sons walks in front of Samuel. Each looks at least as fit as anybody else to be a king. But the Lord says to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance, for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." It seems that Jesse is out of sons, but then it turns out there is one more. He isn't much to look at. In fact, Jesse doesn't even bring him out until Samuel presses him further. Everyone sees David as a child, God sees David as a king.

Rather than lecturing us, these scripture texts instead are declaring to us that "the people of God are given eyes that enable them to see in new and different ways." God told Samuel to go find a new king in Jesse's house. Samuel was sure that he had found what he was looking for in any of Jesse's older sons. They were tall and strong, and had kingly demeanors. David just didn't look like a king; he looked like a child.

We know that we are no different when we are choosing our leaders. We may not judge as much on stature or appearance, but we have other criteria in mind. Perhaps as you thought about the new pastor that would come to this church, you had a certain image in mind. Someone who was older, maybe in his 40s or so with a wife and children, who had at least a few years of pastoral ministry under his belt. At the very least, when we choose our leaders, we want them to have experience, to enter a room and command attention, to stand out from the crowd in one way or another. This story isn't just about God's choosing of a new king for Israel. It is about God's desire for Israel to stop looking for what they can see with their own eyes, and to rediscover an ability to see as God sees.

Our gospel reading says the same thing again. God wants people to develop a new way of seeing. Jesus calls this new way of seeing the Kingdom of God. What is that? When Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God, his listeners most often thought he was talking about an actual, earthly kingdom that he would start in their midst. But each time he talked about the Kingdom of God, he used parables, which really confused them even more. Jesus said the kingdom of God is like the smallest seed on earth; that is the kingdom of God looks insignificant. But, then that seed grows into the largest of all shrubs, with branches large enough for birds. In other words, the Kingdom of God didn't look at all how they might expect it to look.

What is interesting to me, and what I think Jesus is teaching, is that God consistently chooses things that appear insignificant and declares them significant. God looks on the heart, right? Some verses from 1 Corinthians comes to mind when I think of the kingdom of God.

²⁶Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are,

²⁹so that no one might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

The early Christians, who would have been the first hearers and readers of the Gospel of Mark, would have understood this better than Jesus’ original audience. After all, they now understood that the cross, which appeared to be embarrassing and a symbol of death and defeat, was something much greater. Society at that time very class driven, and families and households worked hard to maintain the appearance of very high wealth and importance. Households would have dinners where they would invite the rich and powerful in society to attend. They also invited the poor, but really only to make themselves look more powerful and for the poor to look more lowly. The poor would sit in lower banquet rooms and eat low quality food that would otherwise go to the animals. Meanwhile, the rich would eat high quality food and sit up above these poor nobodies of society. A host didn’t want to risk offending his rich guests by treating the poor guests with anything close to the same honor and privilege.

The early Christians found in their risen savior Jesus Christ, a new way of looking at the world, the Christian way. They did not discriminate, high class – low class; all were invited to the Christian banquets where all were fed, equally sharing the food. This was the communion feast, which included the bread and cup that we celebrate today, and extended from there. The poor were taken care of. Doors were left open and if you passed by in the evening you heard Christians singing songs about this new way of seeing, the Kingdom of God. What they said and what they did was a sharp contrast to society. Instead of boasting or trying to gain honor, their only care was that Jesus Christ was honored.

I think we tend to assume that all of the early Christians were poor or low-class, but that isn’t true at all! There were many wealthy people who shared very generously with the church, opening up their homes, giving money to meet needs, and supporting the evangelical work of Paul and the early apostles. Even so, there was no higher degree of honor given them, no distinction made because of how much they had or how much they were able to give.

In the kingdom of God, the least can be the source of greatness. We see this throughout Scripture, as younger sons displace older sons, as weakness conquers strength, and as David, who keeps the sheep, is an afterthought to bring out to when Samuel comes looking for the next king. This is God’s kingdom.

Sometimes we might feel like there is very little that we can do right now for God’s kingdom, for ministry on earth. Whether it is because finances are tight or we don’t feel like we have the gifts, time, or talents to do much in the church and the community, we might feel like we have so little to offer. I think sometimes we feel that way as a church – that with such limited resources compared to some of the other big churches around us, we don’t have as much to offer in ministry. But that isn’t true!

Maybe the thing that sticks out the most to me about this new way of seeing is realizing all the more how in control God is. There was a time when the Western Christian Church sent missionaries to build cookie cutter churches in other countries that looked just like the one back home. The missionaries often times thought they were going to another country to bring the knowledge of God, to teach the gospel and impart their knowledge to the indigenous people. But the missionaries often got there and realized that God had preceded them; they ended up encountering God in a new way, and coming to a deeper faith in God. Missionaries realized that

they could not judge a culture's faith by its outward appearance. The western church had in fact made Christianity subservient to its Western values, and had fallen into judging on outward appearances. They thought they were sending civilized missionaries to bring civilized Christianity to the people. But, in reality God has always been the sender, and any true ministry happens only because it originates with God. That might not look like what we expect to see.

There is a new way of seeing for us that is ready for us to take hold. The kingdom of God sprouts from things we perceive to be small like a mustard seed. God is the sending missionary and we are all the sent. We should not worry so much about what we perceive as limited talents or resources. The kingdom of God is not limited by any of those things.