

Odd Choices & Priorities

^{CEB} **1 Samuel 16:1** The LORD said to Samuel, "How long are you going to grieve over Saul? I have rejected him as king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and get going. I'm sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem because I have found my next king among his sons." ² "How can I do that?" Samuel asked. "When Saul hears of it he'll kill me!" "Take a heifer with you," the LORD replied, "and say, 'I have come to make a sacrifice to the LORD.'" ³ Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will make clear to you what you should do. You will anoint for me the person I point out to you."

⁴ Samuel did what the LORD instructed. When he came to Bethlehem, the city elders came to meet him. They were shaking with fear. "Do you come in peace?" they asked. ⁵ "Yes," Samuel answered. "I've come to make a sacrifice to the LORD. Now make yourselves holy, then come with me to the sacrifice." Samuel made Jesse and his sons holy and invited them to the sacrifice as well.

⁶ When they arrived, Samuel looked at Eliab and thought, that must be the LORD's anointed right in front. ⁷ But the LORD said to Samuel, "Have no regard for his appearance or stature, because I haven't selected him. God doesn't look at things like humans do. Humans see only what is visible to the eyes, but the LORD sees into the heart." ⁸ Next Jesse called for Abinadab, who presented himself to Samuel, but he said, "The LORD hasn't chosen this one either." ⁹ So Jesse presented Shammah, but Samuel said, "No, the LORD hasn't chosen this one." ¹⁰ Jesse presented seven of his sons to Samuel, but Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD hasn't picked any of these."

¹¹ Then Samuel asked Jesse, "Is that all of your boys?" "There is still the youngest one," Jesse answered, "but he's out keeping the sheep." "Send for him," Samuel told Jesse, "because we can't proceed until he gets here." ¹² So Jesse sent and brought him in. He was reddish brown, had beautiful eyes, and was good-looking. The LORD said, "That's the one. Go anoint him." ¹³ So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him right there in front of his brothers. The LORD's spirit came over David from that point forward. Then Samuel left and went to Ramah.

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Today's text from the lectionary is a rich one. We could look at King Saul's record as the first king of Israel and see all of the points at which he displeased God. Then we would understand why God sent the prophet Samuel to go anoint a new person to become the next king. We could focus on how David was described as "a man after God's own heart" and explore how David illustrated and fit this description. But there's another lesson for us in this text. It's a lesson found throughout scripture. It's repeated over and over. And we ignore it over and over. It's a lesson we just don't want to learn.

Samuel was a prophet in Israel about a thousand years before Christ. For many years, the Israelites had lived in the land. Whenever a crisis would arise, God would raise up a leader from among the people, a leader called a judge, who would rally the people - and with God's help and inspiration, the problems of the day would be overcome. But the Israelites looked around them and saw that other nations had kings, and they, too, began to clamor for a king. Samuel anointed the tallest, most handsome man in the country, a man named Saul, to be king of Israel. The short version of the reign of Saul is that he got too big for his britches. He figured that he deserved all that he achieved because of his own strength and talent. And he became afraid that others were trying to overthrow him. The short word for what Saul became is despot.

So, in our text for today, God sends the prophet Samuel to anoint the person who will be the next king of Israel. Samuel is directed to a little village named Bethlehem. There he seeks out a man named Jesse and tells him to gather all of his sons. The oldest son is tall and handsome and Samuel figures that this must be the one who he is to anoint. But God says, "No." Jesse introduces six more sons, but God fails to give Samuel the nod on any of them. With some desperation, Samuel asks Jesse, "Do you have any other sons?" Jesse replies, "The youngest son is out watching the sheep." The word translated as youngest can also

mean smallest or least. The boy is of no importance. He's insignificant in his own father's eyes. But Samuel says, "Send for him. We can't continue without him." And when this boy, the eighth son, David, arrives, Samuel anoints him to be the next king of Israel.

Saul was chosen, it seems, partly because he was tall and handsome. What can we say? Even today, political candidates often find their media image to be more important than thoughtful positions on issues. Many products are promoted and sold on the premise that they will enhance our image as youthful, attractive, and sexy. It's no secret in the corporate world that when you're job hunting or seeking a promotion, it really helps to be tall and have "executive hair." In all the paintings of Jesus, he's invariably depicted as tallish, nice looking, and with beautiful hair.

When you were a child in Sunday school, you might have sung a song about Zacchaeus. "*Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he. He climbed up in a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see.*" The thing is, in the Greek, it is completely unclear whether the "he" who was short was Zacchaeus or Jesus. We just naturally assume that as the Lord, Jesus must be tall, and as the bad dude, Zacchaeus must be the short guy. Our cultural prejudices form a lens or filter through which we read about Jesus. It never occurs to us that perhaps Zacchaeus had to climb up in a tree in order to look over the heads of the crowd in order to see a short man from Nazareth.

In the same way, we seem to insist on overlooking the sort of people God seems to almost invariably choose. Moses is the baby of a slave, a criminal, a fugitive, a sheep herder out in the wilderness. Jacob was the younger brother. Joseph was next to the youngest in his family. Rahab was a harlot and played an integral part in the fall of Jericho. Despite being a woman in a patriarchal culture, Deborah was chosen to be a judge over Israel. Gideon, a farmer, and the youngest son in his family, was chosen to be a judge over Israel and a great general. Ruth was a foreigner from the hated land of Moab. The prophet Samuel was born into a poor family. The prophet Amos was a herdsman and tree pruner. Several of the apostles were simple fishermen. Matthew was a detestable tax collector. Paul was an enemy of the early Christians. Mary Magdalene was a crazy woman.

A simple peasant girl from a tiny Galilean village had a baby named Yeshua and raised him with her poor carpenter husband named Joseph. As you read through the scriptures, God almost always seems to give special attention and make good use of the nobodies, the timid, the young and overlooked, the poor, the misfits, the socially unacceptable, and those who misbehaved sexually. You have to look hard to find God favoring the prominent and well-qualified. God seems to find hope and value among the marginalized and dispossessed.

When we feel low, rejected, and filled with self-doubt, we need to remember that God finds value in us, just like God through the ages has chosen people who had no stature in society.

There's a flip side to this. When we look around the world, we realize just how prosperous we are compared to most people. We have clean water, warm clothes, and safe food. More than that, we are part of a faith community. We worship, we eat together, we come to Sunday school. We sing hymns and put money in the offering plate and food in the red wagon. We begin to feel blessed and accepted by God, and feel like we're pretty decent people. In our journey of faith, as we walk on the path that Jesus walked, it's easy to begin to feel like we're making some progress toward becoming righteous. And we are making progress. The pitfall is that it's so easy to become self-righteous. It's easy to forget who Jesus spent most of his time with. It's easy to forget all of the unlikely people that God saw value and potential in. And when we do that, we can slip into haughtiness, smugness, and self-righteousness as we celebrate our goodness and look down our noses at others who we are sure lead impure lives. We forget that Jesus once told the religious leaders and pious

officials that, "I assure you that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering God's kingdom ahead of you. (Matt 21:31 CEB) We can't imagine that's true, and we brush it aside!

All of this is rather fresh on my mind because last Monday I led a funeral service for part of my family. Several of the members of that family, including my brother-in-law who lay in the casket, had been driven away from the church many years ago, because instead of Christ's love and acceptance, they faced judgment and disapproval from self-righteous Christians. First Pres in Thomasville is truly characterized by its warm and welcoming people. But we must be vigilant that we do not ever become smug and satisfied with ourselves. We must never – ever - brush someone aside because we don't see their importance or we think that they're unworthy. Always remember that we are on a journey. Some people may just be starting their journey. But up in front of you may be someone with rolling hips wearing a few clothes and lots of perfume. There's just no telling who else may be ahead of us on the journey! God seems to devote a lot of love to those who need love the most. God seems to find great potential where we see none. The last shall be first and the first shall be last. "God chose what the world considers foolish to shame the wise. God chose what the world considers weak to shame the strong."²⁸ And God chose what the world considers low-class and low-life--what is considered to be nothing--to reduce what is considered to be something to nothing. (1Corinthians 1:27-28 CEB) We must take care that we don't get too big for our britches! Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,

We are all trying to walk the path that Jesus walked -
a journey that leads us into ever more righteous territory.
Be sure to welcome those who are just beginning their journey.
Never be surprised at who may be up ahead on the path.