

“An Unlikely Prospect”

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First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

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Texts: Ephesians 5: 8-14 and 1 Samuel 16: 1-13

For those of you interested, it's March Madness season. The brackets are put together based on who college basketball experts believe will be the best team or teams in the tournament. As we all know, the best predictions don't always become reality. Just ask the number one seeded Purdue Boilermakers. For only the second time in college basketball history, a sixteen seed team beat a number one seed team. While unfortunate for them, it provided a great sermon illustration for this morning! In many arenas, the so-called "experts" have it all figured out who will win the election, who will be the best player on a sports team, who will succeed academically, who will get the promotion, who will be crowned the king of Israel. In fact, people seem pretty confident that they even know who God believes is the best. Just ask some of our television preaching personalities. Those who have money, health, strong families,...you name it..., it's because of God seeing them as good and deserving. The only problem is God often disrupts human prognostications.

While it's true that often the experts are correct, it doesn't mean they are always right. In our Old Testament lesson from 1 Samuel this morning, only Samuel knows what he's there to do. Walter Brueggemann says it best, "The most interesting

interpretive question [of this story] is the way in which the hidden purposes of Yahweh [known to us by the name, God] is worked out through the awkward and raw events of historical interaction.” He continues, “David is introduced in three distinct ways [in 1 Samuel]: as a shepherd boy (16:1-13), as a young musician (16:14-23), and as a young unknown warrior (chapter 17).” None of those are resume building descriptions, correct? Finally, Brueggemann tells us that “David is not a human accident, but a divine intervention.”

There’s quite a build-up to this story regarding Samuel and whether he will be accepted or feared. So, at God’s request, he brings the ritual sacrifice. “Only the most naive,” says Brueggemann, “could imagine this great one from the north came south for a mere sacrifice. Nonetheless, Jesse and his sons are consecrated and go to the sacrifice with Samuel. The drama intensifies. Jesse’s sons are paraded before Samuel. Only Samuel knows the reason for the parade of sons. Jesse and the elders do not know that they are witnesses of a decisive event in Israel’s life.”

Note that in this parade, Samuel likes the first son because he’s attractive. Even in the Bible, it seems that humans often think that the one most attractive is the one most able. As if good looks make you good at what you do all on their own. We can deplore that people do this, but sometimes all of us – at least to some extent – get caught up in this problem. God actually warns Samuel (and by extension, us) that what counts is a “right heart” [God] needs to have a king with a rightly committed heart.

Subsequently, the other six sons, seven in total, are rejected. I thought seven was an important number in the Bible. Why, we can't even predict what will happen based on so-called biblical "special" numbers? What are we to learn here?

Brueggemann tells us. "After the seven sons are rejected, the question about the eighth son is finally asked (verse 11a). The story draws our attention to the one outside the completed number, the one who surely is an outsider. The eighth son is the youngest, surely unimpressive, with no claim to make and no credentials to present." Admittedly, the author of the text doesn't do this story line any favors when he tells us that David is ruddy and handsome. There's all kinds of conjecture by authorities on the text as to why. While they may be true, I believe that it's an unfortunate addition that takes away from the main point of the story. God picks the youngest, when it should be the oldest. God picks the outsider, when it should be an insider. God chooses the short, when it should be the tall. And the list goes on...

Brueggemann continues, "Israel will never be the same again. This is a newness in Israel, not caused by oil but by spirit. It is a secret newness not yet known outside the circle of the family, or perhaps the village. The anointing is not a public relations event. It is a sacramental act binding [God] to this new vision of the kingdom...The anointing, in all its secrecy [lest you forget or don't know, Israel already had a king named Saul], will dominate the entire narrative of David's rise to power." He is identified by his "right heart".

You likely already know the point that I want to make this morning, and it's made in the reading of the story itself. While humans often look to the wrong things when we pick leaders, choose teams, name what is important and who matters, we often are at odds with God who chooses based on a "right heart". While that is obviously true here, the problem for humanity is figuring out who does have the "right heart". Sometimes all we see is the outside, the "public relations event" or the story as presented without knowledge about what actual truth is about a person. And yet, how quickly we skip over the outsider based on any number of exclusionary attributes. Many of those attributes are simply superficial. Why is it that we spend so much time on the outside presence, the superficial, the "retouched photo" -- if you will -- when choosing leaders and "important" people?

The main point of this story is that David is a marginal person by occupation, birth order and a number of other issues. He wasn't even invited to the parade. He is uncredentialed and has no social claim to make. The point here is that "among the marginal there are beautiful people, that among the little ones there is the potential for greatness. In the hearing of the story are the seeds of hope for all those who joined the company of narrated imagination of David.

We all nod in assent. Yup, that's right. We might even move to judgment of those close-minded people of antiquity who just weren't sophisticated enough to make

the right choice. We just can't believe they got duped. How dare they look at the wrong things! How quickly we move to judgment of another to exonerate ourselves.

In our heart of hearts, though, we know that we too have been led astray by the handsome or beautiful, the credentialed, and the in-group. And that's the real point this morning. Whether you are the marginalized and need to see that God is more interested in your leadership, despite what society tells you, or if you are the one choosing who needs to take a step back and consider what your basis is for your choice, the goal is to search out the right heart. To look to the sidelines, backstage, marginalized communities, the left out and left behind. Because maybe, just maybe, the leader you need is a person no one considered. The right person may not have the look, but might just have what you're looking for. An unlikely prospect, to be sure, but so was King David, without whom, Jesus does not become the Messiah. The Bible is clear from Genesis to Revelation: real change, real leadership, real hope, a real future is found in the least likely places. Make sure you at least look there. Like Jesse, his family, and all of Israel, you might just be surprised.

Amen.