

Message for June 20, 2021

1 Samuel 16: 1-13

She was an ordinary woman who lived an ordinary life and that included the clothes she wore. Then one day this woman won a huge lottery jackpot and was now rich beyond her wildest dreams; indeed she had more money than she knew what to do with.

Not long after winning the grand prize, she decided to treat herself to some new clothes. She went downtown to the ritzy shopping district and entered a very high-end boutique, the sort of place where the clothes are so expensive that if a person has to ask the price, then they probably can't afford them. When she walked in, the sales staff looked at her and obviously wondered what she was doing there. Then one of the staff walked over to her but instead of asking if she could be of assistance, she suggested that the woman go to the local discount store; maybe she could afford to buy some clothes there! Without saying a word the woman left but she wondered; what would the clerk have thought if she had known that she could have bought not only every stitch of clothing in the store but even the very store itself? The moral of the story, and it is a true story by the way, may be summed up by the old proverb, "Don't judge a book by its cover". We should try and look beyond the superficial appearances to what is actually there. This is one of the messages of today's scripture passage but before we can appreciate it, we need to know what happened first.

After the Exodus, the Israelites did not think of themselves as Israelites, rather they identified themselves with their own particular tribe. The tribes were constantly fighting amongst themselves and there was no central government or ruler whatsoever. God's people lived like this for hundreds of years, but then the Philistines arrived and that changed everything. Unlike the Israelites, the Philistines were united and in no time at all they had forced the Israelites off the rich lush plains into the less fertile mountainous areas. The Israelites then decided that they needed a king just like the Philistines and so they compelled the prophet Samuel, against his better judgement, to pick one. Samuel chose a man named Saul to wear the crown, but unfortunately despite looking like a king, Saul turned out to be an unmitigated disaster. It was obvious that a new king would have to be chosen and it is at this point that today's passage picks up.

God told Samuel to go to Bethlehem where he would find a more fitting person to wear the crown from amongst Jesse's sons. Samuel however didn't want to go, knowing full well that when Saul found out that a new king had been anointed, he would surely kill him! God though told Samuel to go and to use the pretext of conducting a religious service as an excuse for visiting the village.

As a part of the service, Samuel had each one of Jesse's sons come before him. The first was Eliab and he was a tall handsome young man. Surely, Samuel thought to himself, this young man who looked every inch a king, had to be God's choice but he wasn't. As God said, "I have rejected him for the Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." One by one the rest of Jesse's sons appeared before the prophet but none of them were *the* one. When it finally appeared that none were left, Samuel asked and was told that there was in fact one more son, David. He was the youngest, a mere boy, who was out in the fields tending the sheep. Samuel insisted that he be sent for and when the boy came into his presence, he immediately knew that all appearances to the contrary, David was God's choice. David of course didn't just become the next king of Israel, he also became the greatest king in all of Israel's history. The message of this episode is obvious; don't judge by appearances but instead try and be like God and see beyond appearances to who and what is really there.

It may well be an understatement, but this past year has been a tumultuous one in the world around us, and this is not including the pandemic. A little more than a year ago for example, there was the horrific killing of George Floyd by the police officer in Minneapolis while his fellow officers stood by and did nothing to stop him. That incident touched a nerve and prompted outrage and rallies all over the world including one in our own community, rallies that insisted that black lives do matter. Indeed people repeatedly asked, how could this have possibly happened?

Then in the past month the discovery of the remains of 215 indigenous children at a former residential school in Kamloops was announced. Once again there was justified outrage in many places including in our own community; we can think of the 215 pairs of shoes placed in the gazebo in Victoria Park for example. As more details of the residential system came to light including children being forcibly removed from their own homes and families, once again many people asked how this could have possibly happened? Why this is Canada

and furthermore most of the schools were operated by various Christian denominations!

And then we have the latest tragedy that took place in London two weeks ago; the family of five out for a Sunday evening walk when a young driver purposely drove into them killing all but one. The overwhelming consensus is that he singled them out simply because they were Muslim. Once again there was justified outrage in many communities, including a rally in our own town. And once again people wondered how this could have possibly happened. One more troubling fact, though it has not had much play in the media, is that according to some accounts the young man came from a Christian family.

Truly besides the pandemic, it seems as if this past year has had more than its share of tragedy. As different as all of these tragedies are though, they all share one thing in common and that is that the people responsible did not really see what was right there in front of them. The police officer who killed George Floyd for example did not see a fellow human being who was pleading for his life. Those who created and operated the residential school system did not see terrified young children who had been forcibly removed from their families. Nor did they see any real value to the children's culture, traditions, or spirituality either. And as for the young man who is accused of the killings in London, he certainly didn't see fellow human beings when he chose to drive into them. In all these instances the perpetrators did not see past their own assumptions and prejudices. And this is the challenge: to move beyond our assumptions and prejudices to see what, or more particularly who, is right there before us; fellow children of God who have been created in the image of God. As the disciples of Christ, we are called to look at others in the same way that God does; with understanding, compassion and even love, love simply being treating others with the same respect and consideration that we expect for ourselves. Of course, if we are honest about it, this is far easier said than done.

I remember well hearing a woman speak at a General Assembly years ago when our denomination was beginning the process of coming to terms with our role in the Residential School System. She had been a teacher at one of the schools operated by our denomination for most of her working life, and she was heart-broken. She acknowledged that there was absolutely no excuse or justification for any of the abuse and neglect that had obviously taken place. Even so, she said, the intent had been so good and well meaning. Her goal in working

in the school had been to spread the good news of the gospel and to give the children the skills and knowledge that would enable them to not only survive but even thrive in the larger world around them. Almost crying, she asked how could they have ever got it so wrong? How could they have been so blind not to realize that they were not helping the children but rather doing the exact opposite? How could they, ministering in the name of Christ, have been so un-Christlike?

It can be hard and challenging to try and move beyond our assumptions and see others and the world around us as God does. It was certainly hard enough for Samuel to do this, and I sometimes wonder what he would have thought if he had been told that day that the young shepherd boy standing before him was, all appearances to the contrary, not only God's choice to be the next king of Israel, but was even destined to become the greatest king in all of Israel's history. And then if he had been told that that shepherd boy would be one of the earthly ancestors of the messiah himself, born of the house of David in the city of David a thousand years later? Truly appearances can be very deceiving.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, giver of all good gifts, for most people today is Father's Day, and so we give you thanks, not only for them but also for all of the significant males in our lives. We thank you for all in them that is good, kind and faithful and for all that these special people have meant, mean and always will mean to us.

If we had gathered together in-person to worship you today, we would have celebrated Boston's anniversary. We thank you for the church families of which we are apart and for all in them that are good, kind, and faithful.

We thank you for this land and nation in which we live, for her dreams and aspirations, even though the reality doesn't always live up to ideals. We pray this day for all those in positions of authority, that you will guide them as they make decisions for the common good, especially as the pandemic continues.

We give you thanks that at long last we may see an end to the pandemic, praying too for the safety of all as the latest variant spreads. We pray for all who are ill and all those who care for them. We pray too for all who have lost a loved

one and especially, on this Father's Day, for those who are facing their first Father's Day without them.

We pray this day for ourselves, that you will help us to move beyond our assumptions and biases to see other people as you do; with love, compassion and understanding. Help us we pray to love, even as we are loved, to understand even as we are understood, and to forgive even as we are forgiven.

We ask these things in your Son's name,

Amen