

God Sees What's Inside

Texts: **1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Psalm 139**; "God the Eagle", from *Jesus*, by Walter Wangerin

When we lived in Batavia Ohio (near Cincinnati), there was a sign on the way into town, commemorating the founding of the town by the Batavia Gold Mining Company. It was a great idea, except for the fact that there isn't much gold in that part of Ohio. As it turns out, the gold they did find didn't come from the rocks in Batavia, which are, in fact, full of fossils, but empty of gold. No, the gold they found had come with the glaciers, and was dragged there on the underside of moving ice mountains, dragged from somewhere else and in the end, there wasn't much of it, certainly not enough to sustain a mining operation. And since the gold was somewhere else, the company went somewhere else. Batavia is a place that promised gold, but delivered nothing but rocks.

Batavia is proof that you can't tell what's underneath just by looking at the surface of things. Sometimes you have to go beneath that surface to get at the real deal. Israel found that out the hard way. They had wanted to have a king, a real king, a living king, a *visible* king, like the other nations. They didn't want *God* to be their king. That was too hard - immortal, invisible, "God only wise", as the hymn says. Sure, okay, fine, but that *invisible* part was the sticking point. On the surface of things, you couldn't see God at all! So they wanted a human king, a visible king.

Samuel warned them about this: "You *think* you want a king, but you *really* don't. The king you're asking for is gonna take your sons for his army and your daughters for his concubines and your land for his tribute and you're gonna regret this! Stick with God! God's a much better king." But the people wouldn't listen. "No," they said, "we want a king like the other nations, a king we can be proud of, someone to watch over us and keep us safe." That might sound just like God to you and me, but not to the Israel of that time. Instead of having God as their king, they ended up with Saul.

Now, here's how Saul is described: "Kish had a son named Saul, as handsome a young man as could be found anywhere in Israel, and he was a head taller than anyone else." Saul had the whole package: tall, dark and handsome. The girls wanted to be with him, and the men wanted to be him. He stood out in a crowd. He towered over everyone else, so, the people reasoned, he would tower over Israel's enemies. Central Casting couldn't have sent a better man over to play the role of king. Saul just looked the part, so Saul it was.

On the outside, new King Saul had it all. Only problem was, on the inside, it was another story. Saul was prone to fits of depression, he suffered from violent outbursts that came out of nowhere, and he had no great attachment to God or God's law. He ruled the people of Israel just as Samuel had said he would: unwisely, and not well. God couldn't even really work with Saul as king, because Saul's heart wasn't right. He wasn't obedient to God but did his own thing instead, and ultimately his whole line was cut off.

God tells Samuel he's going to rectify the situation. God is going to put a man after God's own heart on the throne, a man, as God says, whom "I have chosen." Now God commissions Samuel to anoint one of the sons of Jesse of Bethlehem as king, but he doesn't tell Samuel which one.

Right away Samuel should have clued in that God was going to do God's usual thing and choose the most unlikely candidate. Just the choice of Jesse as the father of the new king showed that. Jesse was by all accounts not wealthy. He was the grandson of Ruth, the Gentile foreigner whose story is told in the Bible book of that name, and of Boaz, whose ancestors included Tamar, a Canaanite woman almost

executed for adultery, and Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho who betrayed her city to the Israelites. So this is an unlikely royal line, to say the least!

When Samuel sees Jesse's eldest son, Eliab, good looking and tall, he falls into the same trap as before, judging by outward appearances. "That's gotta be the guy," he thinks to himself. God has to set Samuel straight: "Don't consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. God does not look at the things a human looks at. Humans look at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart." One by one, Jesse leads his seven oldest sons past Samuel. And one by one, they are rejected by God, who looks not on outward appearances, but at the heart.

Finally, when Jesse's parade of seven sons is over, Samuel says, "Um, you wouldn't happen to have *another* son lying around here somewhere, would you? I don't seem to be finding the one the Lord has chosen among the ones you've shown me." You see, Samuel isn't the only one who's using the wrong standard. David's own father, Jesse, is too! He didn't even bother to call David in from the fields to be a candidate. David was not head and shoulders *above* everyone else. David was head and shoulders *below* everyone else. He was too short, too small, too young. An afterthought. Sure, he could lead sheep. But Israel? Nah, I don't think so. But never mind. At Samuel's urging, David is sent for, and when he comes in, God says, "That's the one, that's the man after my own heart. Anoint him." So Samuel anoints David to be the future king over Israel. And what a king he was; the greatest Israel ever had. God doesn't look at the outside. God looks at the heart.

At Seminary, I had a friend named Mo. Mo was a guy who made me feel small, about 6'5, 250lbs, all of it pure muscle, with a big friendly smile, a fine sense of humor and a kind and gentle heart. He was the kind of guy you would want on your team for a game of football, or as the best man at your wedding. Mo was also an African American. One time we were out walking in downtown Princeton, and I wanted to look at something in a clothing store. I went in first and Mo waited outside. The clerks in the clothing store were very attentive to me, and very helpful. A minute later, Mo, bored of waiting, came inside. I noticed that the clerks in the store were watching Mo very suspiciously, following him around wherever he went. They never greeted him, never approached him as they had me. I called Mo over to ask his opinion of something. After they saw that we were together, they went back to their work and left him alone, as if the mere presence of a white person legitimated Mo, made him less of a threat to steal something. I asked Mo about it later, and he told me he was always watched in stores, always suspected. Now, anyone who knew Mo's heart would know that he was the last person anyone should suspect of anything. Mo was everything you would want in a person: loyal, honest, kind, gentle, fun, caring - a true man of God in every way. I loved the guy. Mo was gold, but those clerks couldn't see it. They just looked at the outside and used a very prejudiced judgment on Mo. But their actions said more about their hearts than about Mo's. They thought they were judging Mo, but the truth was, at that moment they were setting themselves up for judgment.

It's not just skin color that people jump on to make judgments. In this Pride Month, we should definitely include sexual orientation as something on the outside, that people judge by without knowing about the person's heart. Age is another one that people judge by on the outside. Both the old and the young get dismissed too easily, without getting to know their hearts. But then we have people like Nelson Mandela, who became president of South Africa at 75, or Greta Thunberg, who started a school strike for climate activism at age 15. Our Scripture today tells us that God isn't like that, that God isn't one to judge by outward appearances and qualities like skin color, age, orientation. God looks at the heart. God cares more about what's inside than what's outside.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the great civil rights leader, was probably thinking of this Bible passage in his great "I Have A Dream" speech, when he said, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of

their character.” As Christians, we have to see past the outside to what lies beneath. We have to stop categorizing people by their outward appearance, and look for the heart that lies inside.

What our society needs right now, in this time of turmoil, is a Christian church that refuses to let outward appearances guide us in our thinking or our treatment of other people. It needs a church that will stand up and say that we are, all of us, male and female, black and white, young and old, disabled and fully abled, gay and straight, all of us, made in God’s image, uniquely made by God to be valuable and precious, and we all are people for whom Christ died. That’s what’s important to God, not the color of a person’s skin or their sexual orientation, anything else about their outward appearance. That’s what God cares about: what’s inside a person, not what’s outside.

If the church can get past outward appearances, then society can be transformed. If the church can treat all people as individuals made in the image of God, instead of as representatives of a race, then the kingdom of God can be built in our midst. If the church can get over seeing black and white and see only children of God, then we truly will be acting as children of God.

And if the church can’t, who will, and what hope is there for any of us? May the God who sees into all our hearts make us people after God’s own heart, looking not on outward appearances, but looking inside for the person God loves in each and every person we meet. Amen