

## *“The Most Important Person in Our Life.”*

In the year 1050 BC, the people of Israel decided they wanted a king. Prior to that, Israel was a theocracy — God was their ruler, and God administered his rule through a series of intermediaries called Judges. In all, there were fifteen Judges, who served, one after the other, for about 350 years. I wish I had time to tell you about some of the Judges, because some of their stories are really fascinating. Instead, I'll refer you to the seventh book in the Old Testament, which is conveniently entitled *The Book of Judges*.

So, the Judges had been ruling over Israel, and it was a system that worked pretty well, but now the people wanted a king. So they went to Samuel, who was their current Judge, and said something like: “Hey Samuel, no offence, but we really want a king.”

Now Samuel had seen, in the nations around Israel, how kings could really make a mess of things, so he didn't immediately warm to the idea. But his interest was aroused, and so he asked them, “Why do you want a king?” Their answer was simple: “All of our neighbors have kings.”

To which, Samuel replied: “Well, if all of your neighbors jumped off a cliff ... would you want to do the same thing?” (He didn't actually say that; I was just checking to see if you were still listening. No, what Samuel actually said was something like: “Listen, fellas, God has been our ruler for a very long time, and he's done an *amazing* job. Why mess with a good thing?”)

But the people were insistent, and so Samuel relented. The people chose Saul, and Samuel anointed him as the first King of Israel.

However, it didn't go well for King Saul, and scripture would tell us that it's because the process by which he was chosen was flawed: only *human* standards and qualifications were considered. For example, Saul's first qualification was that he was tall and handsome. And his second qualification was that Saul had been a very successful battle general. The fact that neither of these attributes had *anything* to with governing a nation didn't seem to matter, because Saul was the popular man of the hour.

Well, the folly of that decision became apparent soon enough, and it didn't take long for the people to realize that, as a king, Saul was an unmitigated disaster. And all this brings us to today's reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel.

Samuel knows that the choice of Saul was a dreadful mistake, and he's trying to think of what he might do to correct the situation. Suddenly, God intervenes and sends him on a journey to find and anoint a new king. But, this time, God assures him, things will be different because *God* will choose the new king, and choose him based upon *God's* own standards. And so Samuel sets out in search of this new king.

Eventually, God leads Samuel to the home of a man named Jesse, who had eight sons. And after explaining the purpose of his visit, Jesse begins showing his sons to Samuel. The first son was tall and handsome, and Samuel thought "Surely *this* is the Lord's anointed." But God said, "Hey, Samuel, let's not go there again. This time, listen to *me*, and *I'll* tell you who's to be the next king."

So, Samuel watches this veritable parade of sons, all along listening for God's "Okay, that's him." And it wasn't until Jesse brought in his youngest son, David, that God said to Samuel, "Bingo! He's the one."

Now, let's think about this for a moment: A youngest son — and, in *that* culture, the person usually deemed least likely, least qualified, and least equipped to lead *anything*, let alone a nation — is chosen to be the next king of Israel. It seems like a plan doomed to fail. But the truth of the matter is that Israel never had another king like David. Even the great King Solomon was never as good as David. And the reason was simple: David was chosen by God, using the standards that *God* thought were important; as we heard God explained to Samuel: "for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

*Now, and as an aside: I have to tell you that it irks me, having said all that I did about God's standards being different from our's, to read, as we did few minutes ago, that David "was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome." So, you'll have to take me at my word when I say that God's standards are really quite different from our's.*

In any event, and as it turns out, the men who later succeeded to the throne, were once again chosen by the people, using their own very human standards, and things again didn't go well. And so, if we step back and ask the question, "Why was Israel's track record at choosing kings so poor?" the answer

becomes clear: For whatever reason, the people of Israel failed to understand the way that *God* measured people. In other words, they were never able to consistently see themselves, *or others*, through God's eyes.

So, here we are, some three thousand or so years later, and we're still not a whole lot better at judging people. And the lesson that Samuel had to learn, is still a lesson that we need to learn. Because, for the most part, we still judge others, *and ourselves*, by purely human standards.

For example, when we see someone who is physically attractive, and successful in business, it's as if there's a neon sign floating above their head, and flashing the words "Good Person!" However, the problem is that these human standards *almost never* address our true worth as human beings — as men and women who have been created in the image and likeness of God. And that's a shame, because the fact that we don't make the effort to see ourselves and others as God sees us, is a kind of preventable blindness that keeps us from being the sort of people that God wants us to be. And it prevents us from having the sorts of lives that God wants us to have.

Now, today's Gospel reading is a story about that same sort of preventable blindness. The reading centers on a miracle, on the healing of a man who was blind from birth. There was no doubt that this was a miracle, but nearly everyone missed the point.

The disciples missed the point, because all they wanted to know was why the man was blind in the first place. The Pharisees missed the point, because all they wanted to know was how a man like Jesus — without any credentials *they* might recognize — could heal *anyone* of *anything*. In fact, the only person who got the point, besides Jesus, was the man who had been healed, who offered his take on the matter, when he said: "We know that God doesn't listen to sinners. And yet, this man healed my blindness. Therefore, God must be with him." In the end, the Pharisees reject the man's logic, because Jesus doesn't fit their description of anyone sent from God. They see Jesus only through their own eyes, and not through God's eyes. And so they become like the blind leading the blind.

And so, we've heard the stories of how Saul and David were each chosen to be king of Israel, and the story of how Jesus healed a man born blind. And while those stories are separated in time by a thousand years, it seems to me that the lessons *not* learned are the same: that is,

Saul was *accepted* because he was handsome and successful; David was very nearly *overlooked* because he was the youngest son; and Jesus was *rejected* because he didn't fit someone's bill for a true man of God.

And all of this begs the question: "How *do* we go about the task of judging others, and ourselves? And whose standards do we use?" And it's an important question to ask, because how we answer it will determine, to a great extent, what we think of our selves and others, and, in the end, what we might make of our lives.

Philip Yancey, in his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, talks about a theory which states that *We become what the most important person in our life thinks of us.*

For example, let's consider someone named Dave. Suppose that the most important person in Dave's life is his father. If, while Dave was growing up, his father always told him that he wouldn't amount to anything, then Dave probably *wouldn't* amount to anything. And it's not because his father's words had any magical power to shape Dave's life; it's simply that Dave *believed* his father's words, and he accepted them as ultimately true, and he began to live his life as if that was the final word about who he was, and would be, as a human being. It's a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, that uses human eyes and human standards to make judgments.

But, what if the most important person in Dave's life thought that he was great? What if the most important person in Dave's life said to him, "I believe in you. And I believe that, if you apply yourself, you can accomplish anything you desire." What do you suppose is going to happen in Dave's life? It's another type of self-fulfilling prophecy, but one that is using *God's* eyes, and applying *God's* standards.

All of which brings me to this final question: What would it mean, I wonder, if every person in the world knew, *without a doubt*, that the most important person in their life thought that they were great? Wouldn't that change everything?

Well, this is exactly what the whole of the Bible tells us. From *Genesis* to *Revelation* the story is the same: God's love for us is perfect, and complete, and unqualified. And this tells us two things.

First, that there is nothing that we can do to make God love us any more. No amount of spiritual calisthenics or renunciations, no amount of knowledge gained from seminaries or divinity schools, no amount of crusading on behalf of righteous causes, can make God love us any more than God already does!

And, second, that there is nothing we can do to cause God love us less. No amount of racism or pride, or pornography or adultery, nor even murder, will cause God to love us any less.

In other words, God never says to us, “You must change in order for me to be able to love you.” God never says to us, “You must do something of value before I can accept you.” No. First, last, and always God loves us, God values us, and God places his hope upon us. That being the case, *we must really be something!*

Who is the most important person in your life? And what does that most important person say about you? Do they value you, and believe in you, and trust in you? If not, then perhaps you should start listening to God. Why? Because, as God said to Samuel: “for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” And, in the end, don’t we deserve the best?

Amen.