

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, Year A  
1 Samuel 16:1-13 • John 9:1-41  
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Fr. Jim Cook

## *A Strange Illusion.*

**I**n the year 1050 BC, the people of Israel decided they wanted a king. Prior to that time, Israel was a true theocracy – God was their ruler, who administered his rule through a series of judges. In all, there were fifteen judges, most unknown to the average person in the pew, but a couple should be familiar. For example, there was Samson, who was famous for his physical strength which apparently came from his long hair. And there was Gideon, who was famous for testing the call of God with a fleece of wool. There was even (and this is truly remarkable) a woman who served as judge, whose name was Deborah. But if you want to know more about the exploits of all of the judges, you can look to the seventh book in the Old Testament, which is conveniently entitled the Book of Judges.

So, for about 350 years, the judges ruled over the tribes of Israel, and it was a system that worked pretty well, but now the Israelites wanted a king. So they went to Samuel, who was the current judge, and probably said something like: “Hey Samuel, no offence, but we want a king.”

However, Samuel had a very low opinion of kings. By observing what had gone on in the other nations in that region, he had seen what a mess they could make of things. But his interest was aroused, and so he asked them why they wanted a king. Their answer was simple: “All our neighbors have kings.” To this, Samuel responded: “Well, if all of your neighbors jumped off a cliff, would you want to do the same?” He didn’t actually say that; I was just looking to see if you were listening. No, what Samuel actually said was something like: “Listen, God has been our ruler for a very long time, and he’s done a sterling job. Why mess with a good thing?” But the people were insistent, and so Samuel relented and Saul was chosen and anointed as the first king of Israel.

The process by which Saul was chosen to be king was flawed: purely human standards and qualifications were considered. Saul’s first qualification was that he was handsome and tall. 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, for Saul was the popular man of the hour. The folly of that decision became apparent soon enough, as things began to deteriorate very quickly for the nation of Israel. And it didn’t take very long to realize that, as a king, Saul was an unmitigated disaster.

All this brings us to today’s reading from the Old Testament book of *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, there will be a difference in the way that the new king will be chosen. This time, God will choose the new king, and choose him based upon his own standards. And so Samuel sets out in search of a new king, without knowing who it will be, or even where he is to find him.

Eventually, God leads Samuel to the home of a man named Jesse, who had eight sons. After explaining the purpose of his trip, 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 is to be the next king.” So, Samuel watches this veritable parade of sons, listening for God’s okay. And it wasn’t until Jesse brought in his youngest son, David, that God said to Samuel “this is the one.”

Think about this for a moment. A youngest son – and, by implication, the person least likely to qualify for such a position – gets to be king. Who says youngest children don’t always get what they want? The truth of the matter, however, is that Israel never had another king like David. Even the great King Solomon never measured up to the standard that David had set. The reason was simple: David was chosen by God, using the standards that God thought were important. (And, 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, 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 often quite different from our’s.) In any event, as it turns out, the men who succeeded David to the throne, were once again chosen by the people, using their own very human standards. 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. 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 much better at judging people. For 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 external, human standards. 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 flashing the words “Good Person!” In fact, between services this morning, Shawn reminded of a quote from Leo Tolstoy: “What a strange illusion it is to suppose that beauty is goodness.” And so often it’s true. However, the problem is that these standards almost never address our true worth as human beings, 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.

Today’s Gospel reading is a story about that same sort of preventable blindness. The gospel centers on a miracle, in which Jesus gives sight to 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: “We know that God does not listen to sinners. This man healed my blindness. Therefore, God must hear him when he asks for healing.” In the end, the Pharisees rebuke the man’s logic because Jesus doesn’t fit their description of a healer 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, here we have heard two stories: The story of how Saul was chosen to be king, and the story of Jesus healing a man born blind. The stories are separated in time by a thousand years, and yet the lessons *not learned* are the same: Saul was accepted because he was handsome and successful; Jesus was rejected because he didn't meet the Pharisees' standards for a true man of God. And so, the question that needed to be asked then, and which still needs to be asked today, is this: How do we go about the task of judging others, and ourselves? And whose standards do we employ? Do we use God's standards, or our's? And it's an important question because how it's answered can 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 Bob. Suppose that the most important person in Bob's life is his father. If, while Bob was growing up, his father always told him that he wouldn't amount to anything, then Bob probably wouldn't amount to anything. The point is not that his father's words had any magical ability to shape his life. The point is that Bob believed his father's words, accepted them as ultimately true, and began to live his life as if his father's negative evaluation was all that needed to be said about who he was, and would be, as a human being. It's a type of self-fulfilling prophecy, that uses human eyes and human standards to make these sorts of judgments.

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

As an example of this, Yancey told the story of an Irish priest who, on a walking tour of a rural parish, saw an old peasant kneeling by the side of the road, praying. Impressed, the priest said to the man, "You must be very close to God." The peasant looked up from his prayers, thought for a moment, and then smiled and said, "Yes, God is very fond of me."

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, and that this important person was, at all times, "very fond" of them. What would it mean if they believed with all their heart that there was nothing that they could do that would decrease their value in the eyes of that important person? Wouldn't that change everything?

This is exactly what the whole of the Bible tells us. From *Genesis* to *Revelation* the story is the same: God "is very fond" of us, and God's love for us is perfect and complete and unqualified. There are two things we can take from this bit of insight into God's feelings about us. First, there is nothing that we can do to make God love us more. No amount of spiritual calisthenics and renunciations, no amount of knowledge gained from seminaries and divinity

schools, no amount of crusading on behalf of righteous causes, can make God love us any more. And, second, there is nothing we can do to make God love us less. No amount of racism or pride, or pornography or adultery, or even murder, can make God 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 for me to be able to 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? What does that most important person say about you? Does he value you, and believe in you, and trust you? If not, then perhaps you should start listening to God. Why? Because, as it was said to Samuel: "The Lord sees *not* as a man sees." And, in the end, don't we deserve the best?