
SEEING GOD
1 SAMUEL 16:1-13
A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, MARCH 19, 2023
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In June 2020, amid the onslaught of the COVID-19 global pandemic, my daughter Moriah graduated from high school. This is the same daughter who was 10 years old when we came to Duke, the same daughter who is causing me to experience a tremendous and even tornado-like trifecta right now—she’s almost 21 years old, she has a boyfriend, and she’s a Carolina Tarheel! So pray for me!

For her high school graduation ceremony that was held outside in the parking lot of Trinity School located at the end of Pickett Road in Durham, she was asked by the faculty to give a brief speech. She titled her speech with the same words that were on a T-shirt one of her friends gave her for her 18th birthday. On the front of the shirt were these words: “Beyond My Surface.” That was her speech’s title and in that speech, Moriah raises this question: “Why are we so quick to judge others based on their outward appearance?”

I’m going to quote Moriah some more and I’m probably going to have to give her some royalties for doing this or at least a free meal. She said, “There is so much more to a person than what meets the eye. Many of us [have] preconceived opinions about others before even getting the chance to know them. We stereotype each other and give each other labels based on what others look like or based on the few things that we may know about them. We place what [Nathaniel] Hawthorne called a “Scarlet Letter” on people that marks them and prevents them from being fully accepted and heard as human beings. We don’t always recognize the value of their life or the power of their story... To play off of the words of Lauryn Hill in her song “Doo Wop,” you might come to find that whom you thought was a hard rock on the surface is actually a gem.”

That’s why we need to see beyond the surface like God. In 1 Samuel, God tells Samuel to go to Bethlehem because one of Jesse’s sons will be anointed the new king. When Samuel sees Eliab, the eldest son, Samuel thinks he hit the jackpot and that Eliab must be the one. But God says to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." God basically tells him, “I see beyond the surface.”

Jesse has seven of his sons come to Samuel and God doesn’t choose any one of them [count 1 to 7]. But finally in the end, they call for the youngest, David, a shepherd, to come and eventually he’s the one anointed to be king, right in the presence of his older brothers; as the youngest in my family, I hope my older brothers are listening!

Samuel didn’t expect God to choose David of all people. Who God calls doesn’t always match our conception of who we think should be called. Someone with more experience in leadership and life should be anointed and put in this role. Someone who has a certain look, a certain way of speaking, the outwardly pristine, the one with an influential network and net worth, the one with the proper pedigree, wearing khaki pants and a blue blazer; he has to be the one! But God sees differently and deeper--beyond the surface--and calls a young stinky shepherd to be king. And God doesn’t anxiously rush into this like we might [count 1-7]. Not only does God not see as mortals see, God’s on a different timeclock.

But God knows and hears the heartbeat of the one who’s called. “Mortals look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." On the outside, David seemed too young and was a shepherd, but his heart was that of a king and that’s what the Lord sees. David was more than anyone thought and could do more than anyone thought. In God’s eyes, he was more than a shepherd.

When you see beyond the surface of people, you'll realize that all of us are more than anyone sees. We are more than the surface, which is why God sees our soul. I am more than what you see. I don't only wear white albs and stoles and preach. To see as God sees is to see each other with surplus vision, knowing that what we see is not the totality of our humanity and that we are always more than meets the eye, our inward sea sparkles though our outer shell may be dull sometimes. This is why God gets to the heart of the matter and sees our heart like no other.

God sees deeper and wants us to see as well but at times our conception of who we think God is or should be doesn't match who Jesus really is, so we don't recognize him or his work. We don't see him even if he's in front of us because he doesn't look like 'my' image of God. This is what happens in the Gospel of John. The blind man sees and those who see, don't see. When Jesus heals the blind man, others say that he isn't "from God, for he does not observe the sabbath." And, they don't know where he comes from. How they see God, their conception of God, did not match the reality of God in Jesus. They only see on the surface. It's a reminder that our theology of God is not the same thing as the reality of God.

But thankfully, our conceptions of God and of how God works do not limit or control God. That's why Jesus heals the blind man anyway. The blind man did not ask to see but God knows the cries of the blind man's heart. Jesus sees beyond the surface, our surface, and looks on the heart. It might be scary, but don't we want someone to know who we really are?

Our looks, our stance, our hairstyles, our dress, our tattoos, our skin color, any externals, are not who we are. Our heart is who we are. When Bryan Stevenson—the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, the lawyer, social justice activist, and NYU law professor—was here this past Fall, he said, "people are not crimes." They commit crimes but they are not crimes. People are not their disabilities. People are not their weaknesses or deficits in hard or soft skills. People are not their learning differences.

When we look only on outward appearances, we don't see as God sees. Surface thinking means that if someone looks or talks a certain way, they *must* be a certain kind of person. In the Gospel of John, they thought the man was blind because of sin and not just born that way, therefore blaming the man for his outward physical disability. They didn't know his story, but their stereotype made up a story.

This week, Christian leader and author Shane Claiborne said that a man's body was found in a shopping cart in his Philadelphia neighborhood. And there are people who think that they deserved it, even without knowing anything about their heart. Apathy not only can make one numb but callous. Shane asked the police to cover up the body because it was on the path where children walk to school every morning. One police officer refused and responded with, "it's reality." But what's also real beyond the surface, is that the man stuffed in a shopping cart had a future, a dream, a whispering hope, a heart that God saw. The thousands who have died due to opioid or killed by gun violence were human beings with families and friends and perhaps children, and maybe they loved watching March Madness just like many of us.

"He wears a hoodie; she talks with broken English; they live in a prison; he's a wealthy CEO"—whatever the stereotypes we may have of others, they can stunt our spiritual growth and make our faith shallow because we aren't seeing as God sees.

But there's a call from the passages this morning to see as God sees beyond the skin's surface and to look on the human heart. Judging a book by its cover can have a devastating impact because you can miss God's call, remain blind, and disregard a blessing or healing.

When you look at another person, do you see 'called,' do you see 'whole,' do you see 'gifted,' do you see 'loved,' do you see 'blessed of God,' do you see 'child of God'? Do we see as God sees? Maybe we are blind and need our own eyes opened to see the human heart with the heart of God.

Remember, Jesus was indicted as a criminal thus put on a cross and yet he was a King. “He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53).

The rulers of the day only saw his surface, but his heart was the beating heart of God for the healing of the world. That’s why as the song says, “he looked beyond my faults and *saw* my need.” As Frederick Buechner said, “When I deserved it least, God gave me most.”

Others may see a hard rock on the surface but to Jesus, you’re a gem.