

“Spiritual Chopped Liver”
Samuel 15:34-16:13
© Stacey Steck
Preached June 17, 2012 at San José, Costa Rica

It may surprise you to know that I was not always as handsome as I am now. Or as modest. No, I wasn't always so pleasing to the eye. I used to be skinny, with long, unkempt, greasy hair, and a look of dread fear in my eyes from being picked on all the time. It was rough being runty, androgynously named, and the only kid on the block educated at a private school. But fortunately, there were a lot of people who learned well the moral of our story in 1 Samuel who loved me not on the basis of my current beauty, but who judged me on the fact that I was a human being with a heart that spoke better for me than my appearance. Would that the whole world learn well this lesson.

But until it does, we will need to remind ourselves from time to time of that great kindergarten wisdom to not judge a book by its cover. This is, of course the simplest and best interpretation of tonight's story: that it is one's heart and not one's social standing, birth order, military prowess, intelligence, height, weight, or appearance that matters, that God sees the heart in ways we cannot, and that God's choices are inscrutable. God, in all three persons, has always made choices that mystify mere mortals, but that serve God's purposes even if they confound our logic. Indeed there is a wonderful phrase in the beginning of the story which is easy to overlook but which says quite a bit. God says to Samuel, go to Bethlehem,

“for I have provided *for myself*” a king from among Jesse’s sons. Yes, the new king will rule God’s people, but make no mistake: the choice of David is made not to suit the people’s pleasure or even to meet their needs, but more importantly to serve God’s purpose. You may remember last week’s story in which the people decided they must have a king for their own purposes, to be like their neighbors, and that didn’t really work out so well.

And so the choice of young David must have been a bitter pill to swallow for those who watched Samuel anoint him. Oh, the scandal, Oh the jealousy! Oh the words of vitriol shared around the fire later that night after Samuel poured his horn of oil on what was obviously the wrong head. In spite of the honor it would ultimately bring to his name and his family, you have to feel for Jesse, whose firstfruits were scorned for kingship, and whose runt, as Eugene Peterson translates it in *The Message*, however beautiful his eyes might have been, however handsome he may have been, whose ruddy runt superseded the place of his elder brothers. This is not like the story of Joseph, the son of the patriarch Jacob, the youngest who was loved the most. No, this son, number eight in line to the family inheritance, wasn’t even deemed worthy to be taken along with his brothers to sacrifice with the prophet Samuel. Someone had to stay with the sheep, and it may as well be the one least likely to be missed. And so imagine the outrage of his older brothers, to see the last of the litter plucked from the field, given a place of honor above all honors, anointed in front of them. The jealousy is evident later, when on

the eve of David's battle with Goliath, Jesse's number one son Eliab catches the young David a little out of place offering his youthful perspective of the Philistine giant to the assembled warriors. "Why have you come down from tending our sheep in the wilderness?" he says. "I know the presumption and the evil of your heart."

But even though we was not invited to the sacrifice, he was indeed missed, this shepherd boy. Though David may have been a little pretentious, his brother had it all wrong: it was the virtue of his heart that attracted God, not its evil. With that kind of judgment and jealousy, it is no wonder Eliab was passed over in favor of his brother. Actually, if Eliab and his brothers had thought about it for a while, they would have figured out that God regularly chooses the less likely, the later born. Remember Jacob, the *second* son to Esau? Remember Joseph, the *umpteenth* son of the same Jacob? Even further back, remember the poor murdered Abel, favored over his elder brother Cain in such a way that the latter's jealousy gave way to the first violence recorded in Scripture? Recall Amos, the fig tree tender, and Isaiah, the man of unclean lips, and Jeremiah, the child? None of these great prophets would have been chosen by those typically charged with choosing. And what about Ruth the illegal immigrant, Rahab the prostitute, and Mary the unwed pregnant teen? Who would have thought these societal losers suitable for God's purposes? Certainly not Eliab and his brothers, and perhaps all too frequently, not ourselves either.

It is important to remember especially these last three, Ruth, Rahab, and Mary, if we are to glean something more from this story than simply a reminder of a kindergarten wisdom saying. You see, there are times when the way we read, or don't read, a story becomes more important than the story itself. The story of David is often used to illustrate the virtues of good leadership. After all, under David's steady hand, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah grew to unprecedented levels of wealth and security. And indeed there are many lessons to be learned about best practices for organizational administration from this Biblical hero. But if our reading of the story goes no deeper than that, if it only sees this as a story about the making of a king, it misses that important point the story is careful to point out: that David's selection was for God purposes. Indeed, we do a disservice to that crucial idea if we see it only as an illustration of how God calls leaders.

You see, the lesson of smallness and seeming insignificance containing great power when used for God's purposes does not only apply to those who would be kings, but also to those who would be servants. The life of the mustard tree is not, after all, lived to lead others but to serve them. How does Jesus describe the magnificence of the mustard tree, or shrub or "garden plant," as it is labeled in various translations of the Bible? As a place where birds may make their nests in the shade! The tiny seed which grows into a plant which belies its humble beginnings, has, in the end, a very utilitarian, and oh so valuable purpose. The best leaders are the best servants. Jesus made this clear not only in his life but in his

teachings. And the flipside is also true, right, that the best servants are the best leaders? Just ask anyone who owes a debt of gratitude to teacher, or a parent, two of the most servant-like callings God gives us. How many of us have been led to God's calling for us under the guiding hand of these gentle servants?

Be that as it may, not even the best leaders or the best servants get it right all the time. Perhaps those who are parents or teachers could remind us just how easy it is to favor those students or children who seem to be smarter or brighter or better looking or more eager or better behaved. Who wouldn't want to spend more time and energy on a child who was more fun to be around, or who more readily rewarded our efforts to impart our wisdom to them? It takes a lot of work, I think, to give our best for those who don't seem to be the best, or don't seem to want to be the best, and we must always be watchful that we don't leave anyone behind, intentionally or unintentionally. This dynamic can even be at work in the church when we overemphasize those we perceive as the most spiritual, or the most gifted for ministry, or whom we think must have the most promise as leaders. In recent years there has been a lot of talk about cultivating leadership within churches of all kinds, and God knows we need good leaders, but we must always be mindful when praising leaders to remember the followers, careful that the rhetoric of leadership is balanced by the preaching of the priesthood of all believers. We are not all called to leadership, but we are all called according to God's purposes.

Which brings us to chopped liver, spiritual chopped liver to be more precise. For those of you who have never visited a real Jewish delicatessen, chopped liver is a traditional Jewish food made by grinding a mixture of liver (having been sautéed with onions in schmaltz (something akin to lard), with hard-boiled eggs, salt and pepper. Because of its rather unusual taste and pallid, grey appearance, it is an acquired taste and not a favorite or comfort food with everyone at the dinner table. This has given rise to the popular Jewish-American expression “What am I, chopped liver?” signifying frustration or anger at being ignored on a social level. Furthermore, chopped liver is always served as a side dish, never as a main dish. It therefore makes a good metaphor for someone who feels they are being treated as unimportant or dispensable.

This is the danger of reading a passage like ours from 1 Samuel without recognizing that God’s purposes very much include those who will never be king, those who labor in the background, who don’t speak up very often, who don’t serve on a church council. These are today’s versions of the Ruths, Rahabs, and Marys who were chosen by God for the faith, courage, or goodness that filled their hearts. Those of us who are not leaders are far more than spiritual chopped liver. Every bit as essential to the coming of the Messiah as King David himself, these three women are pointedly remembered in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus. David’s brothers may not have been chosen as king, but that makes them no less important in God’s eyes.

As well, we run the risk of chopped liver thinking if we compare ourselves too uncritically with the heroes of the faith like King David. Comparing ourselves to people we admire may be a natural human tendency but it doesn't get us anywhere. We read about or meet people whose sense of holiness makes ours seem puny. We hear about people who have made such heroic sacrifices that anything we might do would look pandering. And so we might say to ourselves something like, "I couldn't possibly have anything important to say," or "I've got nothing to offer really," so we just bide my time and warm our pew and wait for our ticket to heaven. As you might expect me to say, that just isn't going to cut it. Personally, if I let a comparison to Howard Thurman, Henri Nouwen, or Mother Teresa, some of my heroes of the faith, define my approach to living out my faith, I'd pretty much be paralyzed. But each of them, my heroes, would say the same thing about their heroes, and perhaps that is the best thing I could learn from any of them.

Let me conclude by saying this, that as often as we judge books by their covers, people by their appearances, or at least what we can see in them, we do it at the expense of God's purposes. But we also do it when we judge ourselves by other people's criteria, rather than God's. But we need always remember that God chooses on a different basis than we usually do and uses everybody, no matter how hidden away, how seemingly small and insignificant, whether that is defined by ourselves or others, to do wondrous things. God calls the occasional person to be king, but calls everyone else to play every other desperately needed role to share

the gospel of Jesus Christ. But God never calls anyone to be spiritual chopped liver. What this means is that none of us can practice the fine art of hiding ourselves under a bushel basket! There is, and there will always be, something very important for each of us to do. May God help each of us to discover our special gifts, that each of us may contribute to seeing God's purposes bring life to the world. Amen.