

“Spiritual Chopped Liver”

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Based on 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

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Sometimes the Lectionary conspires to make the preacher seem somewhat self-serving, if not self-justifying. No doubt this has even contributed to certain pastors being diagnosed by their congregations with having a so-called “Messiah complex.” Such could be the case tonight with this story of God’s choosing of a leader for God’s people coinciding with my first Sunday in the pulpit as your leader. The comparisons are inevitable and obvious aren’t they? But I am not referring to being called to a position of leadership on the basis of what is in one’s heart, as was David, nor to being mightily filled by the Holy Spirit, as was David. No the similarity I have with David should be obvious to anyone with a good pair of eyes: Like David, I am ruddy, with beautiful eyes, and very handsome. I am under no illusion that I was called to be the Pastor of ECF for any other reason, well, besides the fact that Flora is my best asset. But 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. 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 not to judge a book by its cover. This is, of course the simplest and best interpretation of this 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.

This must have been a bitter pill to swallow for those who watched Samuel anoint young David. 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 has translated it, 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 the ruddy runt. 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 hooker, 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, but oh so valuable purpose.

This is not to say that leadership is not about servanthood. It very much is. The best leaders are the best servants. Jesus made this clear not only in his life but in his teachings. But is not the flipside also then true, 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 lead to God’s calling for us under the guiding hand of these gentle servants?

I very much appreciated what Ken said last Sunday when he asked you to support me in the new role I have been called to. The role of pastor, like the role of priest or king or prophet in Scripture, is a very important one and it is a very visible one. And even though it is but one role among many, there is often an undue emphasis placed on it that can turn respect for the pastoral role to deference, and support to unquestioned loyalty. It is lamentable, if not surprising, that spiritual maturity is frequently abdicated to the designated “spiritual” person, the one with the direct link to God such that when the pastor is in the room, the ability of everyone else to pray seems to vanish. The danger of ministry by proxy will

always lurk in the background waiting to leap in whenever the rhetoric of leadership is not 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.

Having said this, I am aware of the way the language of call and giftedness has been and can be used to prevent God's call to each of us from being realized. It is all well and good to say that each of us is called to something specific, but if opportunities are not created, if prejudice is not restrained, if power is not checked, it is easy for those in power in the church to gatekeep for their own purposes instead of fostering God's purposes, to keep people in the roles we want them to be instead of the place God wants them to be. It can be very convenient to say, "Oh, we can't all be pastors; your call is to work in the kitchen, to teaching Sunday School, to sing in the choir," while denying the God-given gifts and call of many to various forms of church leadership.

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 or manteca), 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 editions 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.

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.

Some of you may have been involved with churches that have institutionalized the art of adopting a chopped liver mentality. Or perhaps you have heard of the local church which suffered through a very painful period of conflict, the culmination of which was the departure of about a hundred members to other churches in the community. Naturally, this exodus did not go un lamented. Many who left were long time members, well-beloved friends and neighbors of those who stayed behind. But like Samuel's grief over the throwing aside of King Saul, the lament went on a little too long, and was even raised to the veritable and oft-repeated refrain of "Oh, all of our best members left: the best leaders, the biggest givers, the most dedicated and mature Christians," or some variation thereof. This went on so long that a permanent and insidious weed grew up alongside the seasonal flower of lament, a phenomena some took to calling the "Chopped Liver Syndrome." You see, repeating the mantra of "the best leaders, the biggest givers, the most dedicated and mature Christians," had the unintended effect of reducing those who remained to the status, in their individual *and* collective unconsciousness, of second class spiritual citizenry. They were the spiritual chopped liver to the spiritual tenderloin now residing across the river at the other local tall steeple church. This manifested itself in a persistent lack of theological imagination, a constant preoccupation with finances, an overweaning attention to

disgruntled remaining members, and an ever increasing reliance on the pastor to provide the spiritual life of the congregation. This unresolved grief had a multiyear effect on the ministry of this church and is still being worked out today. How wise is our God who pointedly asked Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul?” Instead of working toward the new vision God wanted them to receive, they looked back at their own vision of a golden era now tarnished.

In the coming months, we will begin the process of discerning which ministry to anoint as that chosen by God for ECF to undertake. That is to say, we are going to be collectively like the prophet Samuel, lead by God to the ministry of God’s choosing. And we will pour oil on it, whether it is the obvious choice or the one none of us could have expected. As we practice our discernment, we will need to keep in mind what we have learned in our lessons today: that God chooses on a different basis than we often do and uses everybody, no matter how hidden away, how seemingly small and insignificant, 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 calls none 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 realized in Costa Rica and everywhere. Amen.