

I Sam 16:1 God said to Samuel, "How long are you going to grieve over Saul? I have rejected him as king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and get going. I'm sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem because I have found my next king among his sons."

2 "How can I do that?" Samuel asked. "When Saul hears of it he'll kill me!"

"Take a heifer with you," God replied, "and say, 'I have come to make a sacrifice to God.' 3 Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will make clear to you what you should do. You will anoint for me the person I point out to you."

4 Samuel did what God instructed. When he came to Bethlehem, the city elders came to meet him. They were shaking with fear. "Do you come in peace?" they asked.

5 "Yes," Samuel answered. "I've come to make a sacrifice to the LORD. Now make yourselves holy, then come with me to the sacrifice." Samuel made Jesse and his sons holy and invited them to the sacrifice as well.

6 When they arrived, Samuel looked at Eliab and thought, That must be God's anointed right in front.

7 But God said to Samuel, "Have no regard for his appearance or stature, because I haven't selected him. God doesn't look at things like humans do. Humans see only what is visible to the eyes, but the God sees into the heart."

8 Next Jesse called for Abinadab, who presented himself to Samuel, but he said, "God hasn't chosen this one either." 9 So Jesse presented Shammah, but Samuel said, "No, God hasn't chosen this one." 10 Jesse presented seven of his sons to Samuel, but Samuel said to Jesse, "God hasn't picked any of these." 11 Then Samuel asked Jesse, "Is that all of your boys?" "There is still the youngest one," Jesse answered, "but he's out keeping the sheep." "Send for him," Samuel told Jesse, "because we can't proceed until he gets here." 12 So Jesse sent and brought him in. He was reddish brown, had beautiful eyes, and was good-looking. God said, "That's the one. Go anoint him." 13 So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him right there in front of his brothers. God's spirit came over David from that point forward.

Then Samuel left and went to Ramah. (Common English Bible)

Psalm 51:10 Create a clean heart for me, God;

put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!

11 Please don't throw me out of your presence;

please don't take your holy spirit away from me.

12 Return the joy of your salvation to me

and sustain me with a willing spirit.

13 Then I will teach wrongdoers your ways,

and sinners will come back to you.

14 Deliver me from violence, God, God of my salvation,

so that my tongue can sing of your righteousness. (Common English Bible)

I understand myself to be pretty people smart— one of my dominant forms of intelligence is the interpersonal. That said, I am utterly unable to see with clarity, and therefore to judge with any precision, the heart of any other human being. By heart I mean inner being/soul/mind... the seat of discernment and decision making in each of us.

This limitation was revealed to me when I learned that a doctor I had trusted implicitly murdered his wife. In our four year journey of trying to conceive a child, we worked with two different fertility specialists. The first had a beautiful office with pictures of gorgeous babies he had helped to bring into the world on all the walls. He was dripping with confidence, even bravado. He told me I'd be pregnant in no time. I left appointments with him crying almost every time. I just didn't have a good feeling about this guy. My mom reminded me that, when, after several months I was still not pregnant, he questioned the strength of my faith. When I was still not pregnant a year later I walked away from doctor number one. I spent a year trying to find peace and hope again. And then found doctor number two. Everything about doctor number two was more humble— his office space, his manner of speech. He was honest with me about his limitations and yet hopeful about possible outcomes for us. I was keeping a personal blog through this time and I labeled Doctor One- Dr. Night and Doctor Two- Dr. Day. It turned out that I didn't get pregnant with the help of either doctor. But I walked away from Dr. Day with wholly good feelings about his care.

I was pretty sure I could see the hearts of these two guys. If you had told me that Dr. Night killed his wife I'd be troubled but not surprised. But no, it was Dr. Day... gentle, humble Dr. Day... in jail now for murdering his wife and attempting to cover it up. So disturbing. So baffling. Did NOT see that coming. Apparently, I cannot see into the hearts of anybody— not clearly anyhow.

None of us can. Our first focal reading today suggests that only God sees into human hearts, while acknowledging the limitation of human sight. Samuel wasn't interested in anointing another king. He hadn't wanted to anoint the first King of Israel— Saul. You see, Samuel, whom you met last week as a young boy, in today's story is an old man. And in the time that elapsed between his call in the temple and this story of the

call and anointing of David, he has not only been a prophet, but a judge of Israel— the last judge, in fact. By judge I don't mean an officer of the court— I mean a leader... the book of Judges is all about the period in Israel's history when they did not have a king, but instead leaders of different types rose up to help them when they went astray and were suffering/struggling. Among the judges were men and women, military heroes and prophets. And Samuel was the last. His sons, like his mentor Eli's sons, were disappointing and not able to continue his leadership and the people of Israel demanded a king. And as the story is told, God told Samuel to give them what they want, but to warn them that they would be disappointed. Samuel believed God alone should be king of Israel, but with God's guidance he anointed Saul, a tall, handsome, strong man as the first king of Israel.

But Saul fell out of favor with God, as the story is told, and gravely disappointed Samuel. At the beginning of our story today, Samuel is grieving the failures of Saul. And God tells Samuel to get up and get on with it— fill his horn and anoint the next King of Israel. God might have rejected Saul, but... he was still king. And Samuel knew that anointing a new king when another king was on the throne would likely result in a death sentence. God provides a way to mask what he is doing, but doesn't remove the assignment from him. Samuel is to go to Bethlehem, find Jesse, and anoint one of his sons as king.

Jesse has eight sons. He somehow knows why Samuel is there— he presents seven of his sons, in order of age, before Samuel. Samuel is quite certain the oldest will be the king— he was impressive looking. And the first born had special standing culturally. But God redirects Samuel's attention— external appearance, cultural standing... these are human things... God sees into the heart. And Samuel systematically passes over each and every one of the seven sons lined up in front of him. In a Cinderella-like scene he asks if there is another... And Jesse acknowledges that the youngest is in the field keeping the sheep. Jesse never considered that his youngest son David could be called to so great a role. His vision is limited. But in fact the one son that Jesse never considered, the one son Jesse couldn't see... he was the one. God pointed Samuel to this ruddy boy with beautiful eyes... this good looking

boy... but we're told that that's not the point— God pointed Samuel to this shepherd boy and told Samuel to anoint him. And so the baby of the family was anointed king right in front of all his brothers. And God's spirit filled him.

Now, that verse about God seeing into the heart might have us thinking that David, of all the eight brothers had the purest heart. But... if you read through the rest of 1st and 2nd Samuel it would be difficult for you to say this with any confidence. Do you know the story of David and Bathsheba? How he shirked his kingly duties and did not go to war with his troops? Took the wife of another man and raped her, impregnating her and then arranged to have her husband, a deeply loyal servant soldier of the king, killed in battle when he couldn't get the husband to go home to his wife to potentially cover up David's misdeed... I'm not making this up. You'll find it in your Bibles— 2 Sam 11. And there's an even worse story later on— when one of David's sons rapes one of David's daughters... and David does NOTHING about it- 2 Sam 13.

Our second focal reading is a portion of a Psalm that the book of Psalms suggests was written by David after his grave sin with Bathsheba and her husband Uriah. If we go with this, we hear David praying for a clean heart... a new and faithful spirit deep within... David is praying that what happened to Saul— the withdrawal of God's Spirit, won't happen to him.

God knows David's heart. God knew it when David was chosen. God knows that David's heart was wounded by a father who couldn't see him and by a sitting king who, understandably, was deeply threatened by him. God knew the evil of which David was capable even before David knew. Hurt people hurt people.

God knows all of our hearts. God knows that most of us, truly all of us, if we are humble enough to be honest, could pray the words of Psalm 51 at some time, or perhaps at several times in our lives. People of Judeo-Christian faith have found this to be a powerful prayer for confession for millennia. Every human being has a complicated heart. God can see this. It would be so much easier if some had good hearts and others evil. Really, if we're talking easier, how about everyone having purely good hearts? But my point is... we want to be able to sort the world into good and evil— to be able to trust certain people implicitly and distrust others implicitly, to

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categorize people into day and night. But as Jesus affirmed... no one is good but God alone. And, I would add, no one is evil... we all have complicated hearts that bear the capacity for good and evil, and everything in between.

Last week in our book study we talked about the tendency of American Christians to sort Christians into right Christians and Wrong Christians. Indeed, in our highly polarized, divided society, we are frequently mentally sorting people into right and wrong, good and bad (if not good and evil). The more extreme this sorting is, the more extreme behaviors can result— even deadly violence, that seems somehow righteous to the one who commits it. Kevin and I heard a speaker on Friday night who is determined to not see anyone as a stranger, to seeing in others a part of herself she has not yet met. Might we do the same? Can we acknowledge that all people, ourselves included, have complicated hearts that God alone can see? Can we find a way to love everybody, no matter what? Sometimes this might mean letting someone know when something they have said or done has hurt us or someone we love; it might mean setting boundaries. Always it means seeking to be curious about everyone we meet. And it means praying for those we find it most difficult to love. And whenever we find ourselves being too certain about the heart of another, this is an invitation to remind ourselves who knows hearts and turn back to that one in humble faith.

Sources other than scripture that influenced the writing of this sermon:

Many of the insights into David were gifted to me by the Rev. Yolanda Norton at a Lectionary Retreat at Menucha early in my time in Oregon.

The speaker that Kevin and I heard was Valerie Kaur, a Sikh activist, who is on a tour promoting Revolutionary Love. Learn more about her movement at <https://revolutionarylove.org/>