

Why Were You Chosen?

Sermon preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt

Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA

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II Corinthians 5:11-21, I Samuel 16:1-13

Our first passage comes from the Apostle Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth, an ancient Greek port city. Eugene Peterson writes of the church Paul founded there, and of the letters Paul wrote to them, "For anyone operating under the naïve presumption that joining a Christian church is a good way to meet all the best people and cultivated smooth social relations, a reading of Paul's Corinthian correspondence is the prescribed cure. But however much trouble the Corinthians were to each other and to Paul, they prove to be a cornucopia of blessings to us, for they triggered some of Paul's most profound and vigorous writing."¹

No church is perfect, but reading Paul's letters to the church at Corinth always makes me glad I serve the church at Immanuel. As the text I am about to read begins, Paul is in the midst of a spirited defense of his leadership - a defense that weaves its way through much of II Corinthians. Because they don't like what he has written to them previously, some of the Christians in Corinth "have accused Paul of inconsistencies, impugned his motives, and questioned his credentials."² They have said he doesn't look or sound the part of an apostle. Listen now for part of his response to that challenge. We'll pick up with verse eleven. *Read II Corinthians here.*

Our second passage is from the book of I Samuel. The material in I and II Samuel and I and II Kings relates the story of how the descendants of the slaves God led out of Egypt and into the land of Canaan came to have kings rule over them in Israel. Then it goes on to tell the history of those kings, all of whom were flawed, some more so than others. Early in the story, the prophet Samuel is told to anoint a young man named Saul to be the first king of Israel. But over time it becomes clear that Saul is not the right person for the job. So Samuel gets the message from God that he is to find someone else to anoint to take Saul's place. He is told to go to a man named Jesse of the town of Bethlehem and to invite Jesse and his sons to watch as he sacrifices a heifer to God. God promises to show Samuel which of Jesse's sons he should anoint. We join the story in verse 4. Listen for how David, the great king of Israel, is selected for anointing as king. *Read I Samuel here.*

One of the most important and most challenging assignments in the almost any church is the work of asking our members and friends to fill various roles and take on various tasks. It is certainly true here at Immanuel. Sometimes that work is done by Dan Thomas, who finds people to serve as Sunday School teachers, VBS helpers, IIQ stewards, storytellers and workshop leaders. Sometimes it is done by Jim Stover who lines up our confirmation mentors, or by Nominating Committee members who tap people to serve as elders and committee chairs and members. Sometimes it is done by people involved in our committees and outreach programs themselves who look for others to swell their ranks as together we carry out the awesome responsibility of ministry in the church and the world. But whoever does it, recruiting people is an important and challenging task. From making coffee to greeting and ushering, from being an acolyte to serving as a worship leader, many of the things we are able to accomplish around

here depend on people being willing to ask and people being willing to say “yes”. So before I go any further in this sermon, and before we go any further on a day when we ordain and install elders and recognize the people who help in various ways in our C.E. program, I want to say “thank you” to the people who ask - and the people who say “yes”. *Thank you. The work you do is vital and it is appreciated.*

It is not always easy to find the right people to fill a role. You could ask the prophet Samuel about that. Now it must be said that Samuel was ambivalent about his task from the very beginning. Samuel wasn't sure Israel should have a king in the first place, and that may be why the choice of King Saul as the first one didn't quite work out. Samuel didn't do much to help David succeed as king. In fact, if you read his encounters with Saul, the term passive-aggressive comes to mind.

But then Samuel, according to the book that bears his name, gets a charge from God to anoint someone else as king (while Saul is still serving, which makes it tricky). Samuel is called to go to Bethlehem, to a man named Jesse, who has a whole boatload of sons. And he gets the message that one of those sons should be anointed as the next king. So Samuel goes and invites Jesse and his sons to come to the sacrifice.

The first of Jesse's sons, a tall strapping young man named Eliab, comes out. Samuel looks him over from head to toe and thinks, “Wow. That was easy. Found him. This must be the one God has chosen.” But a little voice in his head tells him no. “Don't look on his appearance or the height of his stature. For the Lord does not see as mortals see: they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.” It is not what someone looks like on the outside that matters, it is what they have going on inside. So Samuel shakes his head, “No, this is not the one.” And Jesse, the father, thinks, “Okay, let's try son number two.” So he calls Abinadab, but Samuel nixes him. Then he summons Shammah, his third son, but Samuel doesn't give him the thumbs up either. Four more of Jesse's sons come out and Samuel takes a good look at each of them and shrugs. “Nope. Nope. Nope. Nope.”

“Is this it?” Samuel asks Jesse. He has looked at seven sons. Seven is a perfect number, the number of completeness. Seven days in a week. But none of the ones on the seven person short list were right for the job. “Do you have any other sons?” “Well,” replies Jesse, “there is the littlest, David, but he is out in the field tending the sheep.” Samuel asks to see him. For a little guy, David is handsome. He has nice eyes, a good healthy complexion. And Samuel says, “Yep, this is the one.” Then he pours oil on David's head and the Spirit of the Lord comes upon David.

Here is where I want to say, “Whoa! Back up, Samuel. Didn't you just get the message that the Lord doesn't look on the outside, but the inside?” And then I remember that even if he is good-looking, David is the littlest, the one you might have least expected to be chosen. He is the eighth of seven sons. I'd still like the story more if no mention was made of David's looks, but it is not the looks but the heart that is important. Besides, it probably doesn't hurt, if you are going to be king, to have some outward appeal.

Now what we are about today isn't the anointing of a king, but the ordaining of elders and the recognition and recruitment of teachers, so I think it is helpful to get the bigger point behind the story:

that it is not what is on the outside that counts, but what is on the inside. And in that respect, it is worth looking back a few weeks to Pentecost Sunday.

Back at Pentecost, we read about the outpouring of the Spirit of God on the disciples gathered in Jerusalem for a harvest festival. It was a dramatic morning. There was sound like a mighty, rushing wind. Tongues of fire descended on the disciples and they were able to speak in various languages as the Spirit gave them utterance. People were able to hear the love of God expressed in their own language. We didn't read what happened next two weeks ago, but then Peter got up and gave a sermon in which he quoted the words of the prophet Joel. "In those days I will pour out my Spirit upon all humanity."

What Peter was getting at is that after Pentecost, the ability to do God's work is not limited to just a few people who are set aside to do it. That Spirit is poured out on every one, no matter what they look like outwardly. So it's not just the elders who are being ordained and installed today who do that work, it's not just the teachers who are being recognized and hopefully being recruited who do that work, it is every single one of us. We have all been chosen to do God's work. The Spirit has been poured out on all flesh. So the next time someone asks you to do something in the church, I invite you to think about this question. "*What were you chosen for?*"

We have all been given gifts and talents to use for God's work in this place and beyond. So the next time someone calls you and asks, "Hey, we need someone to work with IIQ or to help with summer church school," I hope you will think about whether you have gifts to work with kids. The next time someone speaks to you on behalf of one of our outreach programs, I hope you'll think, "This might just be a way I can respond to the call of God in my life." Sometimes God's work is the simple act of making coffee, providing hospitality so that others feel welcome. Something as simple as making coffee might be a way you live out what you were chosen for.

On a day like today, though, it can't be emphasized enough how important the work we do in communicating the love of God to our children is. In that regard, I want to tell a story that I hope all of you who work in teaching in the church and beyond have already heard. If you have already heard it, it is worth hearing again. It is the story of a woman named Mary Ann Bird, who in her memoir *The Whisper Test*, talks about the difference a teacher can make.

She was born with multiple birth defects. She was deaf in one ear, had a cleft palate, a disfigured face, a crooked nose, lopsided feet. As a child, Mary Ann suffered not only those physical impairments, but also the emotional damage inflicted by other children. "Oh, Mary Ann," her classmates would say, "what happened to your lip?"

"I cut it on a piece of glass," she would lie.

One of the worst experiences at school, she reported, was the day of the annual hearing test. The teacher would call each child to her desk, and the child would cover first one ear and then the other. The teacher would whisper something to the child like, "the sky is blue" or "you have new shoes." This was "the whisper test." If the teacher's phrase was heard and repeated, the child passed the test. To

avoid the humiliation of failure, Mary Ann would always cheat on the test, secretly cupping her hand over her one good ear so that she could still hear what her teacher said.

One year Mary Ann was in the class of Miss Leonard, one of the most beloved teachers in the school. Every student, including Mary Ann, wanted to be noticed by her, wanted to be her pet. Then came the day of the dreaded hearing test. When her turn came, Mary Ann was called to the teacher's desk. As Mary Ann cupped her hand over her good ear, Miss Leonard leaned forward to whisper. "I waited for those words," Mary Ann wrote, "which God must have put into her mouth, those seven words which changed my life." Miss Leonard did not say, "the sky is blue" or "you have new shoes." What she whispered was, "I wish you were MY little girl." Mary Ann went on to become a teacher herself, a person of great inner beauty and kindness³.

The problem with our text from I Samuel, in the way it points out how good-looking David is, is that it seems to subvert the very message that it earlier tried to proclaim. God doesn't look on the outside - God looks on the heart. And the message of the Gospel isn't that God says, "I wish you were my little girl" or "I wish you were my little boy." No, it is, "You are my little girl. You are my little boy. I love you. No matter what age you are, you will never grow out of being my cherished child." A love like that is worth responding to with our whole heart, don't you think?

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Message*

² Ibid...

³ Quoted in Tom Long's book *The Witness of Preaching*