

**The Shepherd's Heart**  
**1 Samuel 16:1-13**  
**March 19, 2023**  
**Rev. Laurie Crelly at East Church**  
**Grand Rapids, MI**

They say that the eyes are the window to the soul. Wouldn't it be great to simply look into the eyes of another person and know whether or not they are destined to be a great person or not. Unfortunately, because of human nature, we tend to focus a lot more on the outside impressions we have of someone than the inside. Even we ourselves, when we look at what great things, we may be able to accomplish we can become overly critical and think that we don't have what it takes to be successful and chase our dreams. We may say that we are not smart enough, or we don't have the right body type or simply that we don't fit the image of a successful person. I remember when I was young, I wanted to be a meteorologist, but I never pursued it as a career because I didn't think I was good looking enough to stand in front of a camera. Besides, I was a girl and I only saw men as weathermen. So I let that dream go and never pursued it.

It is odd how much we put into appearances in considering whether someone would be good at something. Such limitations can be even outright mean and discriminatory when it comes to someone with a disability or the color of their skin. Take for instance Jim Abbott. One article about his early draft years said this, "With a 93 mph fastball, his natural ability was undeniable. But Abbott was ignored by most scouts due to his physical condition, leaving Abbott the eternal underdog. Abbott's career represents that other, unquantifiable side of baseball. It was his heart, his determination, and his passion that bridged the gap between expectations and reality. Abbott's confidence in his own ability and his sheer

determination is what led to his success.” What was his physical condition? He was born with no right hand. When scouts for the Angels put him at the top of their list, they never mention his missing hand, just his great pitcher’s body and throwing style. This native Michigander from Flint went on to be in the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Or try telling Greta Thunberg that her one-person protest outside the Swedish parliament would never amount to much because she has autism. Her relentless one-person protest won the hearts of students around the world and eventually brought her before the most powerful leaders at the UN in 2019. She continues her work today at age 21.

Often times even our own prejudices are not fully noticed within ourselves. We are sometimes shocked by our own bigotry, when tricked into noticing. Take for instance an ad campaign done on the streets of Los Angeles, California a few years back. There was a screen set up that showed an x-ray type image of two or three people interacting with each other. Dancing, hugging, playing and just loving each other. The audience could not see their bodies, just their skeletal interactions and everyone was warmed by the loving gestures expressed on the screen. The image gave you the impression you were seeing the inside person, not the external appearance and the joy was universal. Then after a few minutes the skeleton images would come out from behind the screen and reveal who they were. Maybe it was a Muslim and a Jewish person being friends. Or it was an interracial couple, maybe it was a blind man and his elderly wife, or a child with autism and her sister. Maybe it as a lesbian couple, or an interracial gay couple and their child. Maybe it is a non-binary person and their parent who loves them.

What I find curious about this social experiment is that yes, we agree that if we love one another those other things should not matter, and yet the audience was surprised, some were shocked or acted disappointed at the revelation. The audience may even have registered that their approval of the images shifting or worse yet diminish when they saw the external appearance. This emotional experiment helped all of us remember that it is the heart that matters. We all seek love and acceptance; we all experience joy regardless of our body image or relationship status. We all deserve to be seen for our heart and character not our body type or physical appearance.

Why do we do that? Why do we allow our eyes to impact how we perceive a person as worthy? Worthy of success, of love, of a chance to pursue a dream? It happens to us all on some level and if you are self-aware enough I hope you resist the temptation, the deception that can even happen.

The story of King Saul and David is a great example. This reading is part of a much larger story of these two kings. To get the fuller picture you should read all of first Samuel and see how these two people are depicted throughout the book.

One thing to note about Saul was that he is depicted as an ideal king because, as it says in 1 Samuel 9:1 when Saul is first introduced “There was not a man among the Israelites more handsome than Saul; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else.” So I guess that it is not surprising that as Samuel goes to find the next king among Jesse’s sons we read this, “When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely his anointed is now before the Lord.” But the Lord said 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.” 1 Samuel 16:6-7.

Even David’s own family does not consider David worthy to meet the great Prophet, but instead leaves him out among the sheep.

Even though it says that God does not look at the external appearance the writer could not resist saying this about David’s appearance in the end,

“Now David was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome.” V. 12.

As humans we can be tricked into taking action, to consider only the limited options set before us and yet God says there is more. We can learn a lot from Samuel’s heart and his desire to follow God as the great shepherd is powerful. When all seven sons had come before Samuel it would have been tempting to think that he heard God’s word wrong and reconsider the seven sons before him. But willing to second guess humans rather than God, Samuel turns to Jesse and asks, “are these truly all of your sons?” and Jesse has to admit that one was left out because he didn’t think it mattered.

We all matter in God’s eyes. God sees our hearts and seeks away to lift us up to greater things. To call us forward into our true calling. It may not happen immediately but God’s favor is with us. David returns to the fields and eventually is called into the courts to not be a great military leader at first, but to soothe Saul with his music.

As we continue on our Journey to the cross we may find people quick to judge us, to say we are not worthy of God’s blessing. We may even doubt our own worthiness but know that God sees our hearts. God is not fooled by outward appearances like we humans can be. Let us remember God’s words to Samuel, “the Lord looks on the heart.” And seek to be people who also Look on the heart.