

Two Minute Bible Study: Last week we heard the story of God's call to the boy Samuel, who was serving in the Temple of the Lord. God designated Samuel, rather than the aging priest Eli, to speak the word of the Lord throughout Israel. This was the point of turning from the old tribal confederacy toward monarchy, and the beginning of the creation of Israel as a true nation-state. Rather than simply following the will of God, the people demanded a king so that they would be like all the other nations. Samuel warned them that this would not turn out well, but they demanded anyway. God selected and Samuel anointed Saul, who was the most obvious kind of candidate for king. He was from a rich and powerful family, and he stood head and shoulders taller than everyone else. He was handsome, to boot. The obvious choice! He won some important battles against the advancing Philistine army. But Saul did not have the heart to lead God's people. He was mentally unstable, for one thing, and he failed to put God first in his life and in the life of the nation. So, God said, "Enough!" Samuel told Saul that God had selected another king who would lead Israel in the future – not an easy message to deliver, and one that put him at odds with the king for the rest of his reign. This is where we come to today's scripture, the story of the anointing of the boy David, perhaps just 12 years old, to be Israel's future king.

Create in Me a Clean Heart
Psalm 51:10-12; 1 Samuel 16:1-13
October 17, 2021 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC
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This is a Cinderella story, really. You remember Cinderella. Her step-mother and step-sisters are the center of their own story. Cinderella is an afterthought to them; she is useful only for chores, and for the other ways she supports their lives. She doesn't have value in and of herself. Cinderella doesn't look like much, because she is covered with soot from cleaning the cinders from the fireplace. Her hands are probably red and rough. Her dress is dirty and worn. It is easy to feel sorry for Cinderella when you see the movie, because she is depicted as being beautiful beneath all that dirt, while the step-sisters are ugly. If you read this story without the Disney gloss on it, you realize the real difference between Cinderella and her siblings is power. They have it. She doesn't. The ultimate symbol for this difference, oddly, is the size of their feet. Cinderella has little dainty feet, feet with no power of their own, the feet of a princess, if only the prince can recognize it. Her powerful step-sister's feet are big enough to stomp their own way through life, too big to fit into the glass slipper.

What an odd symbol of beauty and worth! My own feet are fairly small, though they grew a bit with each child I carried. Small feet do not make me beautiful or graceful or worthy of notice. They certainly do not make me worthy of living in a palace. They just make it harder to find shoes that fit. My daughter Anna is beautiful and full of grace. She has a way of welcoming everyone she meets. She would make a much better (and more modern) princess than I would. Her feet are size 8 1/2. What bizarre things we focus on as measures of our true value!

Our scripture today is about the search for a designated successor to the failed king Saul. God sends the aging Samuel to Bethlehem to find the next king, and this time Samuel finds the one who is as far from Saul as he possibly could be. Samuel goes to the house of Jesse, a good man but not a rich and powerful one. Jesse is the grandson of Ruth, the faithful immigrant, and her husband Boaz, a wealthy farmer descended from some of the women that the Bible infamously designates as prostitutes or adulterers – not the lineage you would hope for in a king.

Samuel gets Jesse to bring out all his sons. The oldest, Eliab, comes first. He is tall and good-looking, and Samuel, who appears to have learned nothing from the Saul debacle, is ready to anoint him on the spot. But God says, "Not so fast. Don't be fooled by his stature or his appearance. The Lord does not see as mortals see. They look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." One by one, seven of Jesse's sons parade before Samuel, like the wicked step-sisters coming before the prince to try on the glass slipper. These are the sons who are grown and strong and ready for battle, ready perhaps to be king. They are the powerful ones in this family, the obvious choices. But one by one, God rejects them all. Samuel is confused. Surely the future king is one of these. Is there no one left? Finally, Jesse says that there is one more, one who is so young and seemingly insignificant that they assumed he didn't even belong in this parade. Like Cinderella, he is an afterthought to his family. Surely God could not want the one who was out doing the chores, the shepherd!

But Samuel will not let anyone sit down to eat until the youngest has been brought before him. It turns out he is also good-looking, like his brothers, but that is not what God cares about. "Rise and anoint him," God says, "for this is the one." So, Samuel anoints young David with oil in the presence of his older brothers, those brothers who were so much more significant, more ready to be chosen. How could God have picked this pip-squeak instead of them?!?

God knew what was in David's heart, and God granted the Holy Spirit to him from that day onward, so that he walked in power and in truth, as he grew to manhood. David did not become king immediately, but this is the moment that the story turns away from Saul, away from Samuel, and toward the future with David as king.

What are we to learn from this story? Well first, God doesn't care what size our feet are, or our noses. God doesn't care about any of the things that worry us when we stare in the mirror. God sees what is in our hearts. That is what God cares about. Oof! That's a little scary! Because all of us have things hidden in our hearts that we don't want to share with the world, let alone with God. That time we made a fool of ourselves in fourth grade – still haven't forgotten that, or forgiven ourselves for it. The snotty neighbor who gets under our skin. The heart wound that is so deep it just won't heal. The sadness that seems to hang on forever. Whatever we hide from others, especially the things we hide from ourselves, those are the things God sees with eyes of love. God already knows what is in there and is ready to heal it. God sees who we can become.

David himself is said to have written the psalm we heard earlier. "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit." Clearly, this man whose heart was good enough to be chosen by God did not already have a perfect heart, or he would not need this prayer. But he has faith in God's transforming power, and in the willingness of God to continue in the never-ending task of perfecting him. We can have that same faith.

God does not judge us by what the world sees. That is such good news, because we can't do much to change our feet or our hairlines or anything in between. God judges us in love by what is in our hearts, and God is always, always, always ready to transform the broken places there into something new and fresh and worthy of the work to which we are called.

Thanks be to God! Amen