

What's Your Heart Condition?

June 13, 2021

UMC Geneva IL

Once we get settled in Atlanta I'm going to look up an old friend of mine from college and seminary days who lives nearby. His name is Dave. One of the things I liked most about Dave was his sense of humor. And his power of observation. He was a great observer. One of his favorite objects of observation, and derision, was our professors. Not only was he great at picking up on their peculiarities, he was great at mimicking them...much to our delight and their chagrin.

In seminary Dave and I happened to take a course together in Cross Cultural Communication. On paper the course looked great. In person...not so much. The Professor, we'll call him Professor H, was highly touted in the field of communication. As an author he was prolific; his books and articles were clear, compelling and interesting. His lectures were anything but. How ironic! The guy just couldn't communicate verbally! His voice was raspy. He was constantly clearing his throat. He'd 'hmm' and 'haw'. He was completely tied to his notes – until he'd go off on a tangent – something he did far too often. So, when I see Dave one of the first things I'm going to ask him to do is share his hilarious rendition of Professor H.

Speaking of tangents - going off on tangents, did you know our scripture passage today from 1st Samuel is one big tangent? Seriously! In his commentary on 1 Samuel 15:34 – 16:13, *Roger Nam, Prof. of Hebrew Bible at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, points out that today's passage begins and ends with the phrase, "Samuel then went to Ramah." That simple phrase, however, does a whole lot more than inform us where Samuel went geographically. It allows the author, the story teller, to pause for a moment, and go off on a tangent. A very important tangent. A theologically important tangent. You see, up to this point, the story thread in the book of Samuel has the reader focused on the story of Saul – the rise and fall of Israel's first king.

Going off on a tangent can sometimes be useful...incredibly useful. It certainly is in this case, because as Prof. Nam points out, we learn some incredibly important things about God, and about the kind of person God uses. We can even learn a lot about ourselves. So what do we learn? Right off the bat we learn that our **God grieves**. You see, at this point in the story God has rejected Saul as King of

Israel. And we're informed in v. 35 that not only did Samuel grieve over Saul, but that "the Lord was *sorry* that he had made Saul king over Israel."

Say what? God was sorry? God grieved? God regretted that God had made Saul Israel's first king? How can that be? How can an omniscient, omnipotent, unchanging God regret anything? Beats me! However...I do find great comfort in knowing that my God is a God of deep emotion...a God who suffers remorse, who weeps and has compassion on people...on us. A God who can and does change God's mind. Maybe, just maybe, we need to change our minds and some of our concepts of God!

Yes, our God grieves. But that's not all. Our **God comforts** as well. The prophet Samuel is grief stricken over King Saul's failures – morally, spiritually and politically. Saul is a failed leader. Although Saul began well, he certainly didn't end well. (Speaking of ending one's career well, one of the most powerful sermons I ever heard was one preached by our college president in chapel nearly 50 years ago titled "Few End Well." Donna and I still talk about that sermon to this day.) That's certainly true of King Saul. Things didn't end so well for him. But Saul's failure brought no delight to either the prophet Samuel or to God. So in 1st Samuel 16:1 we see God comforting Samuel. We see this in the question God asks Samuel saying, "Hey man...how long will you grieve over Saul?" In essence, God is telling Samuel, "Let it go! Move on! It's not your fault. Saul is responsible for his own failures. And besides, 'I, God, have rejected him.'"

God grieves. Then God comforts. What does God do next? Our **God promises**. Our God offers hope! When things go south, as they surely will. When things don't turn out the way we thought they would, or hoped they would. When things are looking bleak with no hope in sight, what does God do? God promises a way out! A way forward! In short, God promises the prophet Samuel a new king. From where? From the line of Jesse! From the family of Jesse, father of 8 sons from the tiny town of Bethlehem of Judea. God promises - but guess what? The recipients of God's promises must act. Must obey. Must step out on faith. Which Samuel does by making the risky journey to Bethlehem and taking all the steps necessary to prepare for the anointing of a new king.

God grieves. God comforts. God promises. What does God do next? Our **God surprises**. Now, according to cultural convention in ancient Israel, the eldest son

in a family would normally receive the blessing or the anointing. Not so in the case of Jesse's sons. When Jesse presents his eldest son first, his first born - Eliab - strong and handsome, God says, "No!" And so it goes, right on down the line, from eldest son to next eldest son, to next eldest and so on. Until, seemingly, no sons are left. Except the least likely son – the youngest – David. Where is he? He's out tending the sheep! David wasn't even under consideration by his family! Yet God rejects all the older brothers. Why? "Because the Lord does not see as mortals see. They look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

I really like the way Prof. Nam puts it. "Just as God rejects the expected, God then selects the most unexpected...God's ways are often confounding to us. But that should not be surprising considering how little we know. God defies cultural convention and expected norms even when norms may have a good reason...The Davidic line of kings now begins, and unlike the institution of kingship, which was a human institution, God has accepted this kingship which will transcend earthly rule, to the point where God will again grieve, comfort, promise, surprise and anoint in the form of Jesus the Messiah" some ten centuries later.

In God's economy, in God's hierarchy of values, it's all about one's heart condition. Time and again in the *Hebrew Bible* we're told that David was a man, a person, after God's own heart. God is most interested in one's heart condition. Listen to what feminist theologian **Rita Nakashima Brock has to say about the heart. The heart is a metaphor for the human self and the capacity for intimacy. "Heart involves the union of body, spirit, passion and reason. What we know by the word "heart" comes from the center of all vital functions and is the seat of self, of energy, of loving, of compassion, of conscience, of tenderness and of courage."

The fact that God is most interested in one's heart condition is also true in the *Gospels*, where Jesus the Messiah, from the line of David, time and again refused to look on the outward appearances put forth by the religious leaders and the ruling elite of his day and looked instead at what was going on inside of persons. The "heart problem" of the religious, economic and ruling elite of Jesus's day had largely to do with their unhealthy attitude toward social status and wealth. In short, their hearts were hard and unrepentant, characterized by pride and self-righteousness. They were obsessed with money and made little to no effort to

right the injustices of the day. They turned a blind eye to the poor and the powerless, the hungry, the sick and the suffering.

The kind of heart Jesus looked for then...the kind of heart God looks for today is a heart that is soft and tender, compassionate and kind, repentant – not proud. And the tangible fruit of true repentance is genuine concern for the welfare of others, especially the less fortunate, those who are excluded and looked down upon, the powerless and the poor, the outsider. For Jesus – and God – true righteousness is defined by acts of social justice rather than in terms of religious affiliation, social status or wealth.

Our God, the God of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament...the God most fully revealed in Jesus Christ, is a God who does not see as mortals see, for they look on the outward appearance. But the Lord looks on the heart. In short, the most important question God asks us today is simply this: “What’s your heart condition?” Amen.

Rev. Rich Darr
Sr. Pastor – UMC Geneva IL

.....

*Roger Nam, Commentary on 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13 – “Samuel then went to Ramah.” *Working Preacher*, 2015.

**Rita Nakashima Brock, quoted in *The Nonviolent Atonement* by J. Denny Weaver, Eerdmans, 2011, p. 168.