The Lord Looks on the Heart—1 Sam 16:1-13

We like to look at good looking people. We’re more likely to pay attention to and listen to good looking people. Advertisers figured that out long ago. They also discovered that they could influence, at least a little bit, our perception of what was attractive and desirable. In a society where we are bombarded by images, where screens and billboards are flashing images of bodies at us all the time, it should not greatly surprise us if we find our society more body-obsessed, more image-obsessed, more surface-obsessed, than at any time we can easily remember. We’re boxed in by surfaces.

Such fixation upon the outward appearance is symptomatic of a shallow society, a thin culture. Surface is easier to deal with than depth. Surface demands no deep thought, no serious reflection. Surface assures us that now is all that matters. In his very curious and classic book *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau resolved to look beyond surfaces for a period in his life. *Walden* is the fruit of that resolute looking, that thoughtful searching. When I first read it, in high school, it bored me stiff—mostly.

One thing I remember especially well, because it was one of the few pictures in the book, was Thoreau’s soundings of Walden Pond—which is really a lake and not a pond at all. Several of you have spent time fishing, or boating, or swimming in lakes. It’s at least a little important to have some notion of what’s beneath you, there in the depths. In his book, Thoreau includes a cross section diagram of Walden Pond. Why? Because he refuses to rest content with the surface of things. He resolved to explore the depths, to learn about depth.

Those who enjoy fishing try to learn the depths of the waters in which they fish, knowing that some fish like to stay quiet in the cold depths, while others like to stay close to the water plants. If all you want to do is sleep in the boat on the surface of the lake, you don’t need bait and tackle to do that! Those who enjoy boating know how important it is to know where the shallows are, the sand bars, the submerged logs.

Those who enjoy swimming in lakes quickly figure out the importance of knowing where the bottom is soft with oozing inches of muck, and where it is gradual, firm, and sandy, not to mention where the water is clearest or murkiest, stays coldest or gets warmest. The surface, in short, is not all there is, is not all that need concern us. Though it is difficult and demanding work, we must become acquainted with the depths, take the plunge, take the leap.

We’re not too keen on becoming acquainted with the depths, though. We see that it would be difficult and demanding work. We’re not really enthusiastic about things that are difficult and demanding. Lord knows our society gives us very little reason, let alone encouragement,

to become more familiar with the depths of anything, to commit ourselves to anything that would be difficult, demanding, or costly. This is not a new phenomenon.

The people wanted a king. Why? They never had one before. Oh, one person here and there may have set himself up as king over this tribe or that, but he never lasted long, and he was never king over all Israel. The people wanted a king. Why? Because everybody around them had kings. That’s a shallow reason! Having a king to rule was easier, less demanding, than the loose confederation of tribes Israel had. A king was a symbol of national pride, a sign that a nation had really become something. A king was a warning to other nations to show respect or be punished. A king was an indicator that a nation was about to expand, grow, conquer, dominate, and take the resources and wealth of other, weaker nations. A king was a symbol of belligerent pride. All the nations around Israel had a king. Israel wanted a king, too.

It apparently hadn’t occurred to Israel, they didn’t think to remember, that they already had a king, the right sort of king, the greatest and only king. Part of the problem for Israel, I suppose, was that God was not a king they could see, and they wanted a king they could see. God arranged for Saul to come to Samuel. Saul had the disadvantage of being very tall and very good looking—

exactly what a king should look like! Saul did not want to be king. The people did not care. He was just the one they wanted, just the one they had envisioned. A king ought to look like . . . well, he ought to look like Saul. Saul knew nothing about being a king. God told him not to be concerned about that: only listen to God and do exactly as God tells him to do; God will still be the true king, and Saul can be the king the unruly people desired.

Only Saul did not do exactly as God told him to do. Soon enough, he thought he knew better. He thought that God didn’t really mean all that he said, or didn’t mean it in the way God said it. He wasn’t quite sure any longer that God had said all the things that Saul was being told. Saul believed he knew a truer way to honor God. Saul was also a little intimidated by the people. He knew what they wanted, and didn’t know how to tell them no. He didn’t know how to explain to them that what they wanted was contrary to what God had told them to do. So he lead from behind, as we say these days, giving the people what they wanted while convincing himself that this was honoring God and being true to what God really wanted, really meant, really intended.

So God rejects Saul, the handsome king of God’s unruly people.

I’ve been talking to you about surfaces, and about Saul, who was a king of surfaces, not a king of depths. Saul let the people do what they wanted,

while helping them to believe all the while that they were being obedient and pleasing God. Saul’s main qualification for being king, if you can call it a qualification, was that he was handsome and tall. That’s pretty brittle qualification. Look into your own hearts a moment, though. To some degree, we’re all inclined toward those who are good looking. Advertisers know this. Politicians know this. Apart from his assassination, about the main thing many people recall about President Kennedy was that he was handsome. To the extent that anyone gives a fig about the political loyalties of Brad Pitt or George Clooney, it’s because they are handsome—oh, and rich—while you and I are, well, we’re not quite Hollywood material.

The ancient Greek philosophers, who have shaped our thinking more than we realize, believed that there was a special connection between what was beautiful, what was good, and what was true. Each pointed to one another. Each took part in one another. If you want to learn what is true, look to what is beautiful and what is good. If you want to learn what is good, look to what is true and what is beautiful. We don’t think we have a lot of trouble discovering what is beautiful: it’s right there in front of our eyes! And that is our trouble. That was the trouble Israel encountered. That was the trouble Samuel, the prophet of God, encountered.

They saw a man who was tall and handsome, and concluded he was the king for them, without inquiring whether he was good or whether he was true, faithful. In his own eyes he was. Who is the judge?

If you asked most people whether they were good or not, they might initially say no, but if you could push past that surface response, my suspicion is that you would discover that many people think, at least, that they aren’t bad, and if you could truly get to know them as they see themselves, my suspicion is that you would find a great many who believe, deep down, at heart, that they are good people. And that’s a problem.

We want to be good people, and that’s good: that’s commendable. Yes, want to be good! Yes! But we are not good people. If we were good people, we would not need Jesus. If we were good people, Jesus could have stayed with the Father. If we were good people, Jesus would not have needed to walk that long lonely walk to Calvary. We are not good people, no matter how badly we want to be. Lacking that goodness, we lack knowledge of beauty and truth: they all come together. Without God to show us, teach us, and correct us, we have no knowledge of what is truly beautiful, truly good, or truly true. We only have what the world tells us, the times, other people.

Many of the problems we face in the Church in our times can be traced to this sense, deep down, past the rote confessions of guilt, that we are actually good, that we know what is good, that we know, a little better than what the Bible says, than what God’s Word says, what is good and what is right. Sort of like Saul. And the more people are convinced that, deep down, they are good, the more easily they come to think they also know truth and falsehood, what is desirable and deplorable. And that’s a problem.

That’s the problem God points out to us today in our reading from 1 Samuel. Our reading isn’t primarily about David, who says nothing and only appears at the very end. Now, it appears David has several things going for him, physically. He has a fine appearance: he’s young—yay! He’s ruddy—yay! Not beautiful, mind you—no man should be “beautiful,” after all! He’s ruddy! He has beautiful eyes—I guess that’s okay—yay! And he’s handsome. Apparently, he’s not tall, but being tall isn’t everything. And it becomes clear later on that people follow David, at least in part, because he is good-looking. That leads to great things and to terrible things.

We’ve already heard what God said, though, and so we already know how to keep David’s surface attractiveness in perspective. God tells Samuel, who has been as quickly impressed with David’s handsome oldest brother Eliab as he was impressed by handsome Saul—God tells dazzled Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature.” Let me put it this way: don’t be seduced by surfaces. What seems beautiful is not necessarily beautiful.

What seems true is not necessarily true. What seems good is not necessarily good, no matter how many of those around you may think so, say so, and put unimaginable pressure on you to think and say so, too. If you do not know what true beauty is, you will not know what true goodness is, and if you do not know what true goodness is, you will not know what is really true, what Truth truly is.

Confused yet? Samuel was confused, but didn’t quite know it until God spoke to him, reminding him not only who God is but also showing Samuel the way out of confusion. God tells Samuel—and us—“The LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but The LORD looks on the heart” (16:7). The heart, the depths—and how deep do the depths of the heart go? How much of your own heart has still gone unexplored? How much of your own heart still surprises you?

The heart—the place of love, of courage, of hope, of yearning, of willing, of faith. Not many of us, I think, have an orderly heart. Many of us, I think, have unruly hearts. Our heart can become more orderly one of two ways: according to the way of the world, or according to God’s way. The problem for us comes when the two ways become confused. Right now, in our times, our society, in the Church, and in our denomination, the two ways have become very much confused. God’s way and the world’s way. We see what seems beautiful in our eyes, and call it beautiful. We see what seems good in our eyes, and call it good.

We see what seems true in our eyes, and call it true. That’s ordering our hearts according to the world, the way our hearts already naturally incline—are you really a good person or not? What do you really want to say? What do you suppose the people out there would say about themselves, all those neighbors, perishing for lack of a life-giving Word?

“The LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but The LORD looks on the heart.” God knows us through and through. God alone knows what beauty is, what goodness is, and what truth is. God sent Jesus to remind us of this, to show us all beauty, goodness, and truth in himself. You remember how well he did that, and still does! You remember what we did to him, then. And would this world, would our society, do any differently today? Yet Jesus is alive in us, empowering us by the Holy Spirit, opening our eyes to the depths of our hearts, opening the eyes of our hearts, so that we see, so that we see him, see him with the eyes of our hearts.

And he points us to his own heart, his own perfectly faithful, well-ordered, and perfectly obedient heart, the heart of the Incarnate Word. He offers to give us such a heart, all God’s Word, alive in us, as we have faith in him, him who is all beauty, all goodness, and all truth. In God’s Word, through God’s Word, with God’s Word, we can know and we come to know what beauty truly is, what goodness truly is, what truth truly is.

So may he live in us, and we in him, into the sacred depths of eternity.

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!