***BIGGER ISN’T ALWAYS BETTER!***

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Texts: 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13 and Mark 4:30-32

Some years ago Karen, Daniel, Emily and I traveled to Arizona to join Karen’s sister and her family on a camping tour of the canyon lands. Karen’s sister and her family had a pop up camper, sleeping bags, a camp stove, and all the equipment needed for ten days in the outdoors. We were flying in to Arizona with no camping equipment in tow so they suggested we rent an RV to make life a little easier for all of us on this adventure. I made arrangements to rent a 24 foot RV from a rental company in Phoenix, but when we arrived to pick up the RV, we were advised that there were no 24 foot RVs available; for no extra charge the rental company was upgrading us to a 28 foot RV. Bigger sounded better as the extra four feet afforded more interior space; I could almost stand up straight inside it! But when I got behind the wheel to drive the RV off the lot into traffic in downtown Phoenix, bigger no longer seemed better. That extra four feet behind me and the extra foot or so in width were not really assets in navigating the multitude of construction zones on the city streets of downtown Phoenix. It was no big deal ten days later when we returned, but in those first miles through city traffic, smaller would have been much better!

We had a similar experience in Wales a few years later. We rented a van in Scotland, a vehicle they referred to as a “people-mover,” which navigated the Scottish roads just fine; but in Wales where they seem to just pave old sheep paths between stone walls and then draw a line down the center to create a road, the people-mover at times seemed more like a Greyhound bus! In our culture “bigger is better” is an oft-repeated refrain – hence the super-sizing of meals at fast food restaurants and the success of Costco (why get a box of tissues when you can get a 12-pack!) – but bigger isn’t always better. At least that is my experience in renting vehicles, and it is the claim Scripture makes again and again and again.

Goliath seemed too big to defeat; no Israelite soldier would fight him. Then little David came along with his slingshot and nailed the mighty Philistine between the eyes with a stone. Gideon argued with God when God proposed sending him with just 300 men to fight the massive Midianite army – a bigger army would be better – but with God on their side, the Israelites triumphed anyway. King Herod so feared the baby Jesus that he had all the young boys under two in and around Bethlehem killed to try to quell the **big** threat he perceived from the **little** child. “Five loaves and two fish are too little to feed this crowd,” said the disciples; but Jesus showed them that in his hands it was more than enough.

Today’s reading about the choosing of a new king for Israel has echoes of that same kind of judgment – bigger is better. God sent Samuel to anoint one of Jesse’s sons as king, and Samuel figured that God would choose the biggest, the best, and the brightest Jesse had to offer. God would want the most capable son, the strongest and wisest, to lead God’s chosen people. Saul had been a mistake, a disappointment; the Lord was sorry for choosing Saul – that is what the text says. The Lord would not make the same mistake again. So when Samuel arrived with anointing oil in hand and looked at Jesse’s eldest son, he was convinced that he was looking on God’s chosen. Eliab looked kingly! But first appearances can be deceiving; bigger is not always better, and so it was with Eliab. Samuel would have made him king, but the eyes of God looked past the outward appearance to the heart, and Eliab did not have the heart of a king.

According to the psalmist, the heart of a king beats with justice and righteousness. It shows mercy to the poor and oppressed. It protects those in need; it crushes the oppressor. (Ps. 72) Anyone who suggests that concern for the poor is not the proper role of government should go back and read their Bibles, for Scripture is clear: the king (those who govern) has responsibility for care of the poor and the oppressed, the very young and the very old, the citizen and the refugee and the immigrant alike. The current policy of separating young children from their immigrant parents at the border is not fulfilling that responsibility; this week Attorney General Jeff Sessions contended that Christians must support that policy because the government decreed it and the government is established by God, but he ignores the dictates of the psalms and of Jesus. The psalms hold high expectations for government, and our responsibility as Christian citizens is to hold our government accountable for any abuse of power and any failure to fulfill its responsibilities to citizens and non-citizens alike. We may debate how best to meet those responsibilities, but we cannot deny God’s call to address them. We all are responsible for the care of those families and children at the border, and we should demand and support policies that treat them as we think God wants us to treat them, and I can’t imagine God saying, “Take the children from their parents!”

Within the life of Israel in David’s day, the king was the government, and the heart of a king embraces the last and the least in the kingdom, says the psalmist. The heart of a king loves the Lord, for the Lord anoints the king. Samuel would have anointed Eliab, but God looked at him and decided the eldest son of Jesse did not have the heart of a king. What did he lack – humility or a sense of justice? Did he lack mercy or compassion? Was it lack of wisdom or courage to stand with the oppressed that God found wanting? Why did God not choose Eliab to be king?

We don’t know. We know only that the Lord does not see as mortals see, or judge as mortals judge, or choose as mortals choose. The Lord sees what we cannot see, the invisible things of the heart, the intangible things of the spirit; and the Lord picks those whom mortals would not pick. The Lord knows that biggest is not always best, and so sometimes the Lord chooses something less, someone less, to fulfill God’s purposes. Mortals would have picked Eliab, the kingly-looking one, but the Lord looked past Eliab and past Abinadab and past five other brothers to choose the youngest son, David, to be king. Note that Jesse did not even think enough of his youngest son to have him there to stand before the prophet. Only when Samuel said to Jesse, “Do you have no more sons?” did Jesse remember and say, “Oh yeah! There is the youngest but he is keeping the sheep.” David was little more than an afterthought in the royal lineup, a mere boy keeping watch over the flock; yet the Lord saw in David what neither Jesse, nor his brothers, nor even the prophet Samuel could see. The Lord saw the heart of a king! The Lord ignored his youthful appearance, his tender age, his subordinate standing in the family. The Lord ignored all those criteria by which the world would choose a king, and the Lord picked David (though the mortal writer cannot help himself in noting that David was “ruddy, had beautiful eyes, and was handsome”). The Lord does not see as mortals see or judge as mortals judge – the Lord chooses from the heart while we are still stuck on appearances.

“I have a dream,” declared Martin Luther King, Jr., “I have a dream my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Judged not by what is on their skin but by what is in their hearts, judged not by their stature or their status in society but by the state of their integrity – that is the dream of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the way of God. In Christ no longer is there male and female, slave and free, black and white, gay and straight, Republican and Democrat, citizen and non-citizen by which we are identified. In Christ we are known by what is in our hearts – our love for God and for our neighbors.

God knows who we are in our hearts. God knows us as we really are. Before we draw our first breath, before we can create any appearances or facades or excuses, before we can choose God, God chooses to love us and care for us and call us God’s own. God does not judge books by their covers or kings by their stature or disciples by their appearances. God knows our hearts. That is why Jesus chooses an unlikely cast of disciples to follow him. Instead of picking polished statesmen or learned scribes, he chooses crusty fishermen and a despised tax collector. He calls a persecutor of the church, Paul, to be his apostle. He sees in them something we would never see – hearts that might incline themselves to him, and wills that might be molded, however slowly, to his will.

“The Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed,” says Jesus. “It is the tiniest of seeds that grows into the greatest of shrubs.” Who could imagine that a mighty shrub could grow from such a tiny seed, that a little acorn could produce a mighty oak, that a stirring of faith in your heart could produce a faithful disciple! God sees those possibilities – in mustard seeds, in acorns, in God’s kingdom, in us. What then does God see in you? Does God see the humble, servant heart of a disciple or the self-righteous, self-serving heart of a hypocrite? Does God see the heart of a king like young David or the heart of a tyrant like Herod? What do ***you*** find there in your heart? Look deep where God alone sees. What do you find there? Perhaps a mustard seed of faith with which God may yet do big things! Amen

1. Martin Luther King, Jr., “I have a Dream” keynote address given in front of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963 at the march on Washington, D.C. for Civil Rights [↑](#endnote-ref-1)