

Sermon by Rev. Mark Trotter
Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 14, 2004

I Samuel 15:34-16:13

II Corinthians 5:6-10, 14-17

The story of the anointing of David to be king is a “Cinderella story.” That will shock some people who think of fairy tales as fantasy literature for children. But, in fact, fairy tales, such as “Cinderella,” come from a world of injustice and oppression, with a few people at the top, and a whole lot of people at the bottom, and where the rules and customs of society are designed to keep things that way.

Fairy tales were told by folk at the bottom of society as a literature of hope. So they are stories of the lowly being exalted, the poor finding pots of gold, the innocent outsmarting the sophisticated, and the last being chosen first, which is the story of “Cinderella.”

It comes out of a society where, because of birth mortality and frequent epidemics, there were a lot of stepchildren. In those days stepchildren in a family were not given the benefits and privileges of the other children. Stepchildren were told, “There is nothing you can do about this. This is just the way the world is. Your destiny is to endure it.”

So when the prince came looking for a bride, the stepdaughter is told to stay in the kitchen. Only the entitled are considered. But there is a marvelous surprise. The slipper fits only the lowly stepdaughter, who is thereby elevated above her sisters and becomes royalty. What I want you to see this morning is that story is told over and over again in the bible, and nowhere as wonderfully as in the story of the anointing of David.

It was time to pick a new king of Israel. King Saul had lost his popularity, and probably his mind, as well. So God sent Samuel to find a new king. You expect that Samuel will look for someone like Saul, because Saul looked like a king is supposed to look; he was tall, handsome and regal. The text says, “Saul stood a head taller than anyone else in the land.” So the expectation is the new king will look like Saul, that is, he will look the way a king is supposed to look. It was also the expectation that he will come from one of the important tribes of Israel. But instead, God sent Samuel to the tribe of Benjamin, the least among the tribes of Israel. And to the town of Bethlehem, a small, ignoble place, the last place you would look for a king. And to the house of Jesse, who has eight sons.

Just as in the Cinderella story, Jesse lines up seven sons for Samuel to inspect, and leaves the youngest in the field with the sheep. Nothing is said about this. Nor does David protest. He knows his place. It was just the tradition; the youngest is the least entitled. With seven older brothers, it is virtually impossible for David to be chosen, so he is assigned to tend the sheep while his brothers audition for royalty.

The seven sons stand in front of Samuel. Eliab is the oldest, the obvious choice. Samuel says to himself, “This is going to be easy. Eliab is a king if I ever saw one. I can get out of here this afternoon and catch an early flight home.

But God says to Samuel, “Do not look upon his appearance, or the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For I do not see as the world sees. The world looks on the outward appearance, but I look upon the heart.”

There it is! “I do not see as the world sees.” That was a revolutionary statement then, three thousand years ago, and it is today as well. Most of us believe things are the way they are because that’s the way God wants it. Then whenever one group is on top and another on the bottom, the one on the top says, “Don’t look at me, this wasn’t my idea, this was God’s idea.” Most people believe that the Latin phrase ”status quo” means, “Don’t touch.” But in the bible, “status quo” is translated, “Don’t get too comfortable.” Because from the perspective of the bible the purpose of God’s dealing with this world is not to bless it, but to change it.

When the bible refers to “the world,” or “this world,” it is not talking about geography, but sociology; to the way society is structured, the laws, the customs, the traditions. “This world” is always hierarchical. Even in a democracy it manages to arrange things so that the few at the top are privileged, and the great mass of people at the bottom are not. In the eyes of the world, the people at the top are clearly important, and blessed by God. The ones at the bottom are unimportant, and at times in history even assumed to be cursed by God, or at the least ignored by God.

The bible reveals that God’s work in the world is to upset that. “I do not see as the world sees. The world looks at the outward appearance, but I look on the heart.” On a personal level that means God doesn’t care what the world says about you, where the world has placed you, or how God has made you; God loves you as a child. To say God sees not the outward appearance, but God sees the heart, is to say God sees the way a parent sees. God sees you as you really are, not as the way the world has categorized you.

So Samuel rejected Eliab, then Abinadab, the next oldest, then all the other sons in order, and turned to Jesse and asked, “Do you have any other sons here?” Jesse replied, “There is one more, the youngest, what’s his name. He’s guarding the sheep.” Samuel said, “Go fetch him.” The text reads, “And he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. And the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Anoint him. This is the one’.”

What a wonderful story. It is a “Cinderella” story. Actually, Cinderella is a David story. Cinderella is a retelling of the David story for another time and place. David is the prototype. This is the revelation: the least likely is the one chosen. The one no one imagined would succeed succeeds. The lowliest is elevated to the highest.

I love the description of David’s appearance. “He was ruddy, with beautiful eyes, and was handsome.” I have this theory. There is nothing in the story that contradicts this, so I say I have permission to embellish. Besides, the rabbis did it all the time. They called it “midrash.” It means to elaborate on the story in order to bring out the meaning more clearly for a new situation. That is what I want to do with the verse, “He was ruddy, had beautiful eyes, and was handsome.” And suggest that David really was quite ordinary, and plain, and perhaps even homely. That would be appropriate to the stereotype in that society of the lowly shepherd. But when Samuel put his hand on David, and said, “this is the chosen one,” and then anointed him, that is when David became ruddy, his eyes brightened, and he was handsome.

I’ve seen that happen. So have you. The beauty that reflects a radiance within. It is the power of knowing I am worthy. People who are told they are important walk with dignity. People who are told from the day they are born they are beautiful, grow up beautiful. James Angell tells of the time his youngest son brought home a paper from school. It was his first attempt at writing a story. The product was what you would expect from a small child. But the teacher had written a note on the paper. “I see

here the beginning of eloquence.” That’s a kind of anointing. It’s a way of saying, “I don’t look on the outward appearance, the awkwardness, the clumsiness, the mistakes. I look on the heart, and see what is potentially there, who he wants to be. I see not what the person is now but what she can become.”

Now go to the epistle lesson for this morning, Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians. “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.”

That means if you call yourself “Christian” the world as “status quo”, the world of oppression and injustice, the world of categorization, has passed away, and a new world is here. So as a Christian I can no longer regard anyone from a human point of view. I can no longer look on anyone the way the world has categorized them. In other words I no longer see as the world sees. The world looks on the outward appearance, but I look upon the heart.

I will confess that I have spent my whole adult life being liberated from the tyranny of outward appearances. I was born a long time ago in another world, a world in which blacks had their place, and foreigners had their place, and women had their place, and gays had no place. And it was a time in which the church, though it didn’t know it, was actually part of the world. The church was no different than any other institution, because in the church, blacks had their place, foreigners had their place, women had their place, and gays had no place.

Then a wonderful thing happened through the civil rights movement, which took place first in the world because God got tired of waiting for it to begin in the church. The civil rights movement changed the status quo, the way things had always been, removing barriers that kept people in their place. The result has been what Martin Luther King said it would be, a liberation, not just for African Americans, but for all of us. So now we are free to see not just the outward appearance, the labels society puts on people. We are free now to see what is in the heart, the way God sees.

You can say the civil rights movement was the great accomplishment of the twentieth century. We are faced with another challenge in the twenty-first century. It was brought to light in a now famous book written by Samuel Huntington in 1996, entitled, *The Clash of Civilizations*, in which he said that the end of the Cold War, in 1989, did not bring about a new era of peace in the world, but a new era of conflict, this one based on religion rather than ideology and politics. The reason, he said, is that in times of social upheaval, or cultural disruption, when old institutions and values are being questioned, people turn to the center, that is, to religion, for identity. And, according to Huntington, that’s the problem. Because the nature of religion is to divide.

We would have to admit that historically that has been the case. In this world the stance of Christians in relation to other religions has been one of superiority. Christianity has traditionally said, we are saved, and they are not. We are enlightened, and they are benighted. We are right, and they are wrong. That has been the status quo of Christian relationship with other religions. But we are faced with a new challenge today. Really for the first time the church is confronted with other religions. For the first time other religions are not some exotic practice of foreigners in distant lands, but the religion of our neighbors.

In the past the church used the “triumphant passages” in the New Testament in defining our relation to others, such as, “No one comes to the Father except by me.” But to understand the meaning of mission, and evangelism, we could just as well turn to the “servant passages,” which, in the gospels, are much more numerous, such as the Good Samaritan parable, in which a foreigner, despised because of his

nationality, and considered inferior because of his religion, is lifted up as a model for all of us. Because the Samaritan, a member of a hated race, practices without hesitation what members of the chosen covenant people only talk about.

I suggest the Muslims are the Samaritans of our time. If so, then maybe Jesus is saying the real evangelism in our time is not to look upon the outward appearance of Muslims, but into their hearts. There is a wonderful example of what that might look like in the story of Greg Mortenson, author of *Three Cups of Tea*. Several years ago he attempted to climb K2, the second highest mountain in the world. Coming down off the mountain he got lost, and stumbled into a small Pakistani village. The Muslim villagers immediately received him with good biblical hospitality, and introduced him to the tea ceremony. They explained that with the first cup of tea you are a stranger. With the second you become a friend. And with the third, “you join our family, and for our family we are prepared to do anything, even die.”

When Mortenson discovered the village had no school, he built one. Other villages heard what he had done and asked for a school too, and from there it spread quickly. Today he is building schools in Taliban controlled Pakistan. Mortenson was asked to address the United States Congress. He said, “I’ve learned that terror doesn’t happen because some group of people somewhere like Pakistan decide to hate us. It happens because children aren’t being offered a bright enough future that they have reason to choose life over death.”

So how do we meet the challenge of other religions and other cultures. Huntington predicts that both Christians and Muslims will retreat to their cores, which means they will become fundamentalists and produce the clash of civilizations. But he also wrote, almost as a footnote, that the only way the clash can be avoided is to treat people who are different with respect and dignity.

Which sounds an awful lot like, “Do not look upon the outward appearance, but look on the heart.” “For we regard no one from a human point of view...because there is a new creation. See, the old world is gone, and everything has become new.”