

David had a pretty rough childhood. He was the youngest son of his father’s second wife. His brothers, particularly Eliab, didn’t like him. They picked on him constantly. He was routinely excluded from family gatherings. Obviously, there is nothing new about family dysfunction.

David was an outsider, even in his own family. He was the youngest. He was assigned the most menial and humiliating job – the job of the shepherd. When the powerful prophet Samuel, in today’s reading, comes to anoint a new King to replace Saul, he personally invites Jesse and all his sons to share the priestly portion of the sacrifice with him. This was a huge honor – something that happened to a family maybe once in a lifetime. But Jesse didn’t even include his youngest son, David. It would be like not inviting one of your own sons to your own daughter’s wedding. He and his other sons left David out in the fields, by himself, tending the sheep. Imagine that!

We know the scars that a rough and loveless childhood can leave. I’m reading a memoir by Andre Dubus III called *Townie*. He’s a writer and the son of a well-known writer by the same name who left his wife and Andre and his other 3 children in poverty. Dubus includes the searing scene of the day his father drove away for the last time. *“He hugged Suzanne, squeezed my shoulder. He tousled Jeb’s hair, then he was in his car driving down the hill through the pines, blue exhaust coughing out its pipe, Jeb scooped up a handful of gravel and ran down the hill after him, “You bum! You bum! You bum!” He threw it all at once, the small rocks scattering across the road and into the woods like shrapnel.”*

When David grew up and became a father himself, we see that he was a terrible father. He indulged his sons every whim. He never said no, and it destroyed his sons. It’s possible that David’s treatment by his brothers and his father was the reason he was such a bad father. The Bible says that the sins of the father will be visited upon the children and their children’s children. It is easy to see patterns of abuse and lovelessness running through the generations of a family. How many times do you say to your spouse, “You’re acting just like your father!” or “You are turning into your mother!” and mean it in a nice way?

So when Samuel comes to anoint the new King, Jesse leaves David the outsider outside. It never even occurs to him that David, the youngest, the runt, the lowest, could be the next King. Kings are supposed to be strong and valiant and powerful, aren’t they? Well, who can blame Jesse? Who doesn’t judge by the externals? Who isn’t tempted to judge a book by its

cover, as they say? Rare is the person who doesn't size someone up by their looks, their dress, their accent, their school, their family, their fitness.

Especially fitness. Many of us on the staff just got back from a conference where we see the same people once a year. Someone said to Dave Johnson, who is obviously as fit as you can be, "Wow, Dave. You look great. It seems to me that you have lost between 7 and 8 pounds since last year." Um. Thank you. I guess?

Judging by appearances is a terrible thing to do and most of us do it all the time and have already done it this Sunday morning at church! It is a terrible thing to do because – obviously – people are more than their appearances. But it is terrible too because we are almost always wrong in our judgments about people.

I love the writer Philip Roth's insight about this. *"You fight your superficiality, your shallowness ... and yet you never fail to get (people) wrong. You get them wrong before you meet them, while you're anticipating meeting them; you get them wrong while you're with them; and then you go home and tell someone else about the meeting and you get them all wrong again. You get them wrong, and then on careful consideration, you still get them wrong."*

We get people wrong, because as we read in the passage this morning, we "look on the outer appearance." This is what Jesse does and this is even what Samuel does. Eliab passes before Samuel – he was the oldest son, the biggest son, the strongest son. Samuel says *"Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord."* But he was wrong. The Lord says to Samuel, *"do not look not look on his appearance or the height of his stature."* If you judge by externals you will never fail to get people wrong.

God, however, does not get people wrong. God does not get people wrong because "God does not judge as we do". God does not look on the outer appearance. Instead, God looks on the heart. God is the God, as we say in our liturgy, "to whom all hearts are open."

So Samuel insists that David be called in. Everyone has to stand around and wait. (They aren't even allowed to sit down!) The brothers and fathers must be really irritated. David finally comes in from the field. I'm sure he's not appropriately dressed. He must smell like livestock. But when he arrives, the Lord says, *"he is the one."* David, as we read elsewhere is "a man after God's own heart." What does this mean? What does it mean to judge the heart or be someone after God's own heart?

We get some insight into this by comparing Saul, the rejected King and David, the chosen King. What is so interesting about this is that both men perform badly as King. They both had all the failings, foibles and tendencies to do stupid things that you and I have. In fact, David's performance is as bad as, if not worse than, Saul's.

David is an adulterer and an accomplice in murder. You'll remember that he spies on a married woman while she is naked, is consumed with lust, and demands that she sleep with him. He is King, after all. Then he arranges for her husband to be put in the front line of a losing battle, so he would be killed and he could have the woman all to his own. Even Bill Clinton didn't come close to this kind of behavior! Surely someone cried to David, "*You bum! You bum! You bum!*" So, clearly God is not judging us on the outward appearance of behavior. As He has said, God judges the heart.

The difference between Saul and David is just that - the attitude of the heart. When Saul is confronted with his disobedience, he either rationalizes his behavior or blames somebody else. (Maybe you know someone like that?) He never accepts that he is wrong. Saul's heart is hard.

David, on the other hand, commits murder, adultery, is vicious, cruel, bloody, and emotionally unstable, but when God puts the finger on him, he cracks. He just breaks. No arguments! No rationalizations! He repents. You can read his confession in Psalm 51. "*Have mercy on me O God...For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me... Against you have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight....*" David's heart is broken.

Just as a totally hypothetical example, when I'm locked in an argument with my wife, all it takes is a soft and broken heart and an "I'm sorry" with no buts attached for a breakthrough to occur. The same is true with our hypothetical children. In our better moments we're not judging by appearances or behavior. An "I'm sorry" – a real I'm sorry, on either side, makes all things new.

That is not to say that there aren't consequences for sin. As I've said, the sins of the fathers are visited upon several generations. David must face the ramifications of his rebellion and his stupidity. His household is destroyed. The seeds he sows in Solomon's life wipe out the kingdom. Solomon begins as an extraordinary man of God and ends up a tyrant estranged from God.

There is no escaping the consequences of sin. Life shows us that. That's called the Law. But what God shows us is that there is also no escaping the love, the grace, the mercy and the acceptance of God. That's called the

Gospel. Paul says in Romans that yes, sin abounds, but grace abounds all the more.

But before David's life played out as all lives do – a mixture of good and bad - he came in from the sheep fields, and the Lord said, "Rise and anoint him, for he is the one." God knew, of course, what was in store, and yet He still calls David a man after His own heart. And God does not get people wrong.

What kind of God would anoint a scoundrel like David? Maybe a God who has compassion on your human weakness and failing. Maybe a God who wants your heart to be supple, even broken towards Him. Maybe a God who not only judges your heart, but forgives it too.

Amen.