

"What Is Pleasing to the Lord"
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent
Lectionary Year A
March 2, 2008

Texts: 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Ephesians 5:8-14
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"Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord." That is what the writer of Ephesians recommends to the members of the church in Ephesus to whom he is writing. "You need to try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord," he says to them. What an interesting way of stating such a recommendation. *Try* to find out what pleases God. What kind of a remark is that?

I don't think it's a dare. The epistle writer is not saying, "Go ahead, just *try* to find out what is pleasing to the Lord. I'll bet you can't." Yet the use of the word *try* in that recommendation makes it sound like finding out what is pleasing to God may not be an altogether easy thing to do. The command has the character of uncertainty and ambiguity about it.

I think it is safe to say that finding out what is pleasing to the Lord is not like trying to find a needle in a haystack, though. It's not mission impossible. It's doable. God doesn't play games with us. God doesn't expect us to read his mind. God has gone out of his way to give us at least a general idea of what is pleasing to him. If we were to take a few moments and list the things we know God likes, we wouldn't have much trouble doing it.

Nevertheless the writer of Ephesians seems to know something

about God when the epistle writer implies that it takes some effort to discover what is pleasing to the Lord. The statement, "Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord," suggests that it is not always as simple as it may sound. We may not be able to determine what God is pleased with automatically, instinctively, with little thought. We might have to work at it some. Why? Why?

Perhaps no story in the Bible answers this question better than the account of the anointing of David from the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel. Let me set this narrative in its historical context for you. After the Israelites were allowed to enter and claim the land God had promised to their ancestors, the question arose of how best to govern themselves in the land. In the beginning, Israel occupied the land of Canaan as a loosely connected tribal confederacy, somewhat like the American Indians lived, recognizing God as their only true ruler.

However after some time the people became dissatisfied with this type of government and wanted a king, so that they could be like all the other nations who had kings to fight their battles for them. After warning them through the prophet Samuel concerning what serving a king would be like in reality, God reluctantly let them have a king, one he knew they would like. His name was Saul. 1 Samuel 9:2 tells us that he was extremely attractive. In fact it says that "there was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else." Saul looked like a king. His regal appearance would make the people proud to be Israelites. "Now there's a king," everyone would say when he walked down the street.

But looks aren't everything; they sure weren't with Saul. He

turned out to be a failure as a king, because he had trouble following orders. Obedience was not exactly his strong suit. He kept second-guessing God, presuming to know God's will, acting when he shouldn't act, or failing to act when he should have. He just couldn't get things right. So God gives up on him and rejects him. God washes his hands of Plan A and starts working on Plan B.

The Lord doesn't wait around for Saul to die either. God sends Samuel out to anoint a new king *while Saul is still on the throne*, which explains why Samuel is more than a little hesitant to do what God wants him to do. It's risky business. If Saul finds out, he will be plenty upset.

It's important to notice, I think, that the story of Saul makes it clear that God, in his enormous freedom, may not continue in his commitment to leadership or power arrangements that are bankrupt and have failed. God can abandon what does not work [Brueggemann et al, p. 210]. God can start over. *God can try something new and different when the same old thing quits being effective*. When it's broke, God can fix it and doesn't hesitate to do it. Throughout history we have seen this come true with respect to every social or political institution, including the Church. God can and will work in a new way when the old way doesn't work anymore. Sometimes we aren't as ready for change as God is.

But God says to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul? It's time to get past it, time to get on with things." And God instructs the prophet to put the oil for anointing in his horn and set off for Bethlehem, to Jesse's house, because God has already chosen *for himself* a king from among Jesse's sons. Saul had been the king for the people; Saul's replacement would be the king for God. In order to keep

Saul from finding out what Samuel is really going to Bethlehem to do, God suggests that the prophet take a heifer with him, so it will look like he has gone to Bethlehem to make a sacrifice there, not an unusual thing for a prophet to do. At least in Old Testament times, it seems that things just seem to go better when you take a heifer along with you.

Where is Samuel going to find God's new king? *In Bethlehem*. It's a little village, largely unnoticed, not likely to be a place in which to find Israel's next ruler [*Ibid.*]. And Jesse belongs to the smallest clan of the smallest tribe in Israel. Why should the prophet be looking among the sons of *this* family for Saul's replacement [Craddock et al, p. 169]? It seems a poor place for royalty to reside, but it is to Bethlehem that Samuel is sent by God to *mashah*, to anoint, God's king for the people, just as it will be to Bethlehem that the shepherds and the wise men will come, centuries later, to gaze into a manger and see the Messiah, the title derived from the Hebrew word *mashah* [*Ibid.*]. O little town of Bethlehem becomes the city of God's king not once, but twice.

The elders of Bethlehem, the leaders of the village, are frightened at Samuel's coming. After all, Samuel ordinarily is a part of Saul's entourage. The villagers apparently have learned long ago that the central government only comes to town to seize something—people, money, produce, or votes. Agents of the government rarely come to give, only to take. Sound familiar? The villagers naturally assume that Samuel represents Saul. They don't know the true nature of the prophet's mission there.

What happens next in the story is not unlike a beauty contest with Samuel and God as the judges. Like contestants for the title of Miss

America, seven of Jesse's sons pass before the prophet who is privately conferring with God in whispers [Brueggemann et al, p. 211]. As soon as Samuel lays eyes on Eliab, he thinks to himself, "He must be the one. Tall, dark, and handsome, this young man is impressive indeed. He looks like a king. His regal appearance would make the people proud to be Israelites. "Now there's a king," everyone would say as he walked down the street. In fact, he looks just like . . . Saul. Oops."

Samuel forgets that looks aren't everything. But God reminds him. In fact, God spells it out that he does not see as we see. We look on the outside; God looks on the inside. *It's what's in a person's heart that matters most to God.* And in the same manner, God rejects all seven of the sons Jesse has brought to show off to Samuel. It looks like the prophet has traveled all the way to Bethlehem for nothing. He has struck out here. God won't have any of these for his king.

But on his way out the door, Samuel off-handedly, probably in a kidding way, says to Jesse, "You wouldn't happen to have any more sons hanging around somewhere would you?" And Jesse, almost apologetically, says, "Well, yeah, I've got my youngest boy. He's just a kid, though. You wouldn't be interested in him. He's still wet behind the ears. I didn't even bother showing him to you. He's out in the pasture, keeping the sheep." "Fetch him," says Samuel, probably sensing what is about to happen.

So God, as God is prone to do, picks the runt of the litter to be his king. The Lord who is our shepherd chooses the shepherd boy to be his king. "This is the one," God says of the least likely candidate for the job, the last one we would have selected. And in the presence of his

brothers, with them shaking their heads in disbelief, David is anointed as Israel's king. He becomes Israel's greatest leader, and we know exactly why from this passage of scripture. It is not because he is the oldest or the tallest or the most handsome of Jesse's sons. It is because *God* has chosen him, *God* anoints him, *God* sends his spirit upon him in a mighty way from that day forward. It is David who is pleasing to the Lord.

"Try to find out what is pleasing to the Lord." That's what we are to do, says the writer of Ephesians, and it's good advice. But there's a warning that the story from 1 Samuel leaves us with. *The Lord does not see people or things as we do.* What is pleasing to God may not be what first catches our eye. And what makes us look the other way may be exactly what God has his eye on. We can be so impressed with or so repulsed by exterior things, superficial things, shallow things. Appearance means so much to us—the way we look, the clothes we wear, the car we drive, the house we live in, the trips we take, the clubs we belong to, the restaurants we frequent, the people we know. These are the things we use to evaluate ourselves and others.

What is pleasing to the Lord? We can try to find out as we look below the surface, behind the facade, inside the heart. That's where God is looking, and that's where we should too. It's what we should be most concerned about with regard to ourselves. How's my heart? What's the state of my soul? That's God's bottom line, not the one found in my checkbook, parked in my garage, or hanging in my closet. What's inside the heart and soul? And that's what we should be most concerned about with regard to everyone else we encounter—at home, at work, at school, at play. We spend so much time worrying over and

working on things that God could less about, which means we also spend so much time neglecting those things that really matter to the Lord.

The writer of Ephesians wants us to be able to see as God sees, and the epistle writer understands that we can't see as God sees all by ourselves. We're in the dark; we're blind; we're clueless. But we don't have to stay that way. Ours is the Lord who heals blindness and restores sight, even if we have not seen clearly all our lives. We don't have to remain in the dark. We have a light, the light of the world, the baby in a manger in Bethlehem bathed in the glow of a brilliant star shining overhead.

And you know what light does to vision, don't you? It improves it greatly. *The more light you have, the better you can see.* Because of Christ, you are children of light, able to see clearly what is good and right and true. If you belong to Christ, you have the light that allows you to see, better than before, what God's will truly is. So live as children of light, belonging to Christ, and you will see as God sees and make the choices God wants you to make. And in the process of living as children of light, guess what? You will discover what is pleasing to the Lord.