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“Heart Vision”
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Fourth Sunday in Lent (Year A)
March 2, 2014

1 Samuel 16:1–13; Psalm 23; John 9:1–5

An article in the December edition of *The Atlantic*

features a welcome statement recited by neighbors in the Mt. Pleasant community,
a prosperous Washington, D.C. suburb.

It reads like this:

“Gay or straight, woman or man, all are welcome—except for Republicans.”

One respondent to the welcome statement calls it

a near-perfect expression of liberal intolerance.

The respondent says: “Note that the diversity which liberals cherish is in the superficials:

skin color, gender, sexual orientation—things that tell you nothing
about a person's values, morals, philosophy, talents, etc.”

(*The Atlantic*, “The Conversation,” March 2014, p. 10)

“The Lord does not see as mortals see,” God tells Samuel.

“They look on the outward appearance,
but the Lord looks on the heart” (1 Sam 13:7).

How do we learn to see as God sees? Is that even possible?

How do we put on the eyes of God and look beyond the superficials of skin, sexuality,
stature, and status, and see into the heart of each human being?

Our church's welcome statement is noteworthy, or at least we think it is;

we print it every week in our bulletin and give it prominence on our website:

"FPC welcomes all who worship here. We honor and celebrate
the human diversity and unity that God gives us in Christ.
We welcome individuals of every age, race, nationality, gender, ability,
sexual orientation and economic circumstance
to participate fully in the life of the church."

Does this express something significant,

or is it just another pledge of short-sighted, presbyoptic, liberal intolerance?

How do we convey to our visitors and members that we also are interested in meeting them
and getting to know them, heart-to-heart, as they are known by God?

In ancient Hebrew culture, the heart was *not* the center of emotions,
as we might think today.

It was considered the very core of one's being: emotion, intelligence, discernment, wisdom,
commitment, and character were all elements of heart;
perhaps it's what the world today would call *essence*.

To look "on the heart" of someone would be to look on them from the inside out,
as the Psalmist suggests in Psalm 139:

"You perceive my thoughts from afar... before a word is on my tongue,
you know it completely." (Psalm 139: v.3-4)

Can we welcome/see into another person based on all of these qualities?

Is that humanly possible?

I don't think so, actually; I don't think it's humanly possible.

Nor do I think that it is humanly impossible, with God's help.

Take Samuel, for example.

Samuel is the son, miraculously born to the barren wife, Hannah,
and as such, he is dedicated to God as a judge and a prophet,
but he calls himself a seer, one who sees (1 Sam 9:19).

He sees what some human beings cannot see, but he still does not see as God sees;
his vision is limited, as is ours.

What he sees in Saul, in Israel's first king whom God calls him to select,
is that Saul is the tallest, handsomest man in Israel.

And I imagine his internal dialogue sounded something like this:

“Here is someone who will *dominate*, someone who will *get things done*.”

And so he voices his conclusion to all the people of Israel with these words:

“Do you see the one the Lord has chosen,” he says.

“There is no one like him along all people” (1 Sam 10:24).

And the people shout in affirmation, “Long live the king!”

They welcome the GQ notion that tall and handsome go a long way
in qualifying one as a leader.

They welcome/see by sight, but not by heart.

Then when Saul fails to live up to God's expectations of him,

he is rejected by the Lord as King over Israel,

and Samuel is sent searching for the next king who will replace Saul.

Ironically, the Lord sends Samuel to the little town of Bethlehem,

not exactly the holy land's hotbed of leadership development,

where once again Samuel's eye is captured by the appearance

of the tallest, eldest candidate, Eliab, the first-born and most striking son of Jesse.

But the Lord rebukes Samuel, the seer, and contrasts divine and human insight:

“The Lord does not see as mortals see,” God cautions Samuel.

“They look on the outward appearance,

but the Lord looks on the heart” (1 Sam 16:7).

Jesus will say a similar thing when his disciples “see” a blind man along the side of the road

and ask, “Who sinned, this man or his parents,

that he has been blind since birth?”

The all-too-human disciples *see* blindness;

they *see* sin; they *see* unjustified cause and effect with their all-too-mortal eyes.

“Neither,” Jesus replies. “He was born blind so that God's work might

be shown/seen through him... for I am the light of the world” (John 9:1–5).

In other words, the blind are not always the visually impaired;

even God's seers and Jesus' disciples can fail the vision test for discerning character,
heart, and inner essence.

So Samuel is led by God to see leadership qualities in the heart of little Bethlehem's least: a child, the youngest, smallest, most expendable; a shepherd, who does nothing more significant with his time than to babysit animals.

The Hebrew word here is *haqqaton*: the unnamed, the youngest, the insignificant, the outfielder, the one with the most minimal job on the farm, the runt from a family of despised Moabite ancestry.

At the Faith Connections Conference on Mental Illness in Chapel Hill on Friday, the keynote speaker, Dr. Harold Koenig from Duke, mentioned that he thought David might even have been manic/depressive, due to the erratic swings in his behavior later in his life.

(Dr. Harold G. Koenig, MD., Director of the Center for Spirituality, Theology and Health, Duke University Medical Center)

The Hebrew word, *haqqaton*, then, might also encompass the stigma of mental illness. But this *haqqaton* was not chosen for what mortals saw in him or how they labeled him; he was chosen for what God saw in his heart:

chosen and anointed by God to live to God's glory
so that God's work might be shown through him.

And at the end of the narrative, we learn his name: David.

Apparently, insignificantly out of sight never means one is out of God's mind.

One of the best welcome statements I've ever read comes from

The NC Arboretum in Asheville. It welcomes by *prohibiting unwelcome*:

"The NC Arboretum... prohibits discrimination in all programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability and where applicable, sex, married status, financial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, political belief, reprisal, or because all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program."

Now THAT is a welcome statement.

It is all-inclusive, but does it see into the heart of those who walk through its gates, to behold the beauty of the Lord in its gardens?

I have found, sadly, that I tend to learn more about the heart of a member here when I speak to their family in preparation for a funeral.

Their transparent conversation at that time

gives me wonderful insight into what made that person tick,
and how each one of us is uniquely gifted as a child of God,
specially loved and particularly led by the Spirit of God
beyond any external labels society might have put on any one of us.

For example, I learned that Muriel Kirkland's grandchildren called her "Nana, the boss."

And she was because she had to be, her mother having made a "Sophie's choice" decision early in her life to walk out of her marriage, taking along only her eldest child, leaving behind Muriel and her brother to fend for themselves while their father worked.

Muriel had to be "the boss" from age three and up in order to survive.

And I could see Muriel with God's eyes, then, in retrospect,
as a vulnerable, motherless child, *at heart*, who had to garner steely strength
in order to get by on a day-by-day basis,
and in order to build the kind of family security for herself that her parents
were unable to provide for her.

And I learned that David Garrison grew up in the south with a passion for social justice and racial reconciliation that put him at odds with the many small, rural Southern churches which God called him to serve, often making him less than popular there.

And on the surface, he lamented that he often felt like a failure in ministry,
but at heart, he was consistently obedient to what he saw as the gospel's
claim upon his life lived in these communities.

And I learned that Alex Crockett tithed to the church, tithed as *a minimum*, every year of his adult life, except for one.

When he and Becky had their first child, that year, they decided to use their money to purchase life insurance instead of tithing to the church.

And Alex claimed it was the most miserable year of their lives—not committing to the spiritual practice they believed in so fervently.

And so thereafter, he and Becky always tithed to this church, gave 10% of their income,
at least, as well as supporting both of their home churches
and several other favored churches.

At heart, Alex and Becky Crockett are very generous and devoted church people.

Why didn't I see these things before now?

Why didn't I try harder to see beyond the superficials

and discern at least something of what was their motivational life force at heart?

And I could kick myself each time for not having known that about them

or for them not feeling comfortable enough to tell me these important things.

Is it possible, I wonder, to welcome people into the church

based upon externals, upon things that we might see with our limited human
vision,

and then to work quickly to view each person expectantly,

wondering what God is doing in this person's life,

envisioning him or her as unique child of God,

exploring the depths of our friendship, and discipleship together,

and sharing the secrets of our spiritual quests together?

I wonder what it would take to make that happen, sooner rather than later?

At first glance, writer Bill Tammeus's stepson, Chris, is confined to a wheelchair,

developmentally disabled by a seizure disorder he has suffered since birth

so that he now functions cognitively as about a five year old.

Who sinned, the disciples would ask, this man or his parents,

that he has been disabled since birth?

Why does it matter, I imagine Jesus would say?

At any rate, Chris begs to come to church any time his stepfather can get him there

because, as Chris puts it, someone at church might need a hug.

Tammeus believes that, *at heart*, Chris embodies love;

he even goes so far as to call Chris's love incarnate—love in the flesh.

As such, he is a blessing to the Second Church of Kansas City, where he attends.

Theologian Jürgen Moltmann once said that a congregation in which disabled persons

are not accepted is itself "a disabled congregation."

Moltmann's own brother, who was severely disabled, was euthanized by the Nazi regime.

We would call that murder.

Tammeus says that Chris would have hugged him, too.

(The Presbyterian Outlook, "Insights," January 2014, p. 34)

I have to wonder what a church welcome statement might sound like
from the lips of Jesus.

If I could venture an imaginative guess and put words in Jesus' mouth,
perhaps it would sound something like this:

*Because I am the light of the world that enables true vision,
my body, the church, opens its arms to all who are weary and heavy-burdened;
to all who are poor, in body, mind, or spirit;
to the grieving, the humble, those starving for righteousness;
to the gracious, the sincere;
to the peacemakers and the persecuted
because God does not see you as other people might see you,
but sees and loves you for what is in your heart.
So come and find welcome in my open-armed body, the church. Amen.*