

“Reflections on Leadership”
1 Samuel 15:34-16:13
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church
June 17, 2018

About six months after I began work in another setting, a very nice man in the church invited me to go to lunch. I had met him but had not yet had time to get to know him, which was why he extended the invitation. I greatly appreciated it.

The food was good and he had no agenda other than us getting to know each other. He told me a bit of his story. He lost a career after a successful but intense run and had rebuilt his life in a healthier way. I shared some of my story and it was just a good lunch, with one possible exception. Early on in the conversation he noted how well things seemed to be going with my ministry. “Of course,” he said, “I assume you know that you are at the peak of your popularity right now!”

Indeed, I did know. I was still in the honeymoon phase of ministry, that early period when minister and church are getting to know each other and there hasn’t been time to offend anyone with a different opinion or difficult decision much less a need to address any critical issues. But the reality is that at some point every faithful minister has to risk offense. It’s just the nature of leadership and life and the Gospel for that matter. So, we reach our peak of popularity very early. It’s not all downhill after that, but we do peak early, at least in this sense.

Yet leadership is critical for ministry and business, politics and athletics, indeed, every arena of life. And there are bodies of knowledge to guide us in becoming more effective leaders. I did post-doc work at the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro where I was exposed to a good bit of this knowledge. But in the church, we look not only to this sort of knowledge, but to the biblical witness. We look for guidance in what to consider in leaders and examples of faithful leadership. Jesus is our primary example, obviously, but after him, King David is on most top ten lists. He is not perfect, but more space is dedicated to him than anyone else in the Hebrew Bible. What can we learn from him?

A good place to begin such an inquiry is with his anointing as king, as described in today's reading from 1 Samuel. Saul is still alive but has failed miserably at the job, so much so that God is said to regret ever having made him king. The only other time God is said to feel such regret is in Genesis 6:6 and that is for having made humankind at all! The truth is, as we recall from last week's reading, God does not want the people to have a king at all. So, Saul is a concession, and as it turns out, not a very good one.

So, at this point, God sends Samuel to Bethlehem to anoint a new king. The prophet is not exactly thrilled with this mission. It's not that he thinks Saul can change and get the job done. It's that Saul is still alive! God wants Samuel to anoint a new king while the old king is still living and in control of the military. Understandably, he fears for his life, but God tells him to make it look like he is just going to perform a religious ritual. He is to take a heifer to sacrifice to the Lord.

This might not have been enough for us, but Samuel goes and when he arrives, the elders meet him trembling. They ask if he comes peaceably? The text does not say why they are so concerned, but it seems likely they know there is tension in the air between Saul and Samuel and Saul is still king. They don't know how God is involved, so just considering the human principals here, they're not sure who is going to prevail and they'd just assume not get caught in the middle.

But Samuel says he has come peaceably, he just wants to make a sacrifice to the Lord, which is true, it's just not the whole truth. But as Rabbi once said, who knows the whole truth anyway? Samuel invites the elders to come and he makes sure Jesse and his sons are included and sanctified for the sacrifice. For Jesse is the one God has sent him to see.

Then, as all are gathered, Samuel has Jesse bring in his sons, one at a time, beginning with Eliab, and Samuel thinks he is the one chosen to be king. But God says no, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature (a clear jab at Saul who was handsome and tall), because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

So, Eliab is not the one chosen. Nor is any of the others sons Jesse brings. And so, the question arises as to whether he has any more sons.

As a matter of fact, as it turns out, there is one more, the youngest, who is out taking care of the sheep, but surely he isn't the one. It's a bit like Cinderella's family telling the prince there is another daughter in the house, but he wouldn't want to have anything to do with her.

But Samuel tells Jesse to send for this son. So, he is brought in; he is ruddy, has beautiful eyes and is handsome, and God says, "Rise and anoint him; for this is the one." Samuel does and the Spirit of the Lord comes mightily upon the boy, David is his name, and the Spirit remains with him from that day forward.

So, just considering this much of David's story, what can we learn about the nature of leadership as God views things? One thing that seems clear is that God does not view things as we do. And so, sometimes the person who doesn't look like much to us is the very person God chooses, the one who can make a difference. Whether because of age, size or some other variable unknown to us, David isn't even considered worthy by his own family to be included in the line-up of possibilities for leadership, but he is the one God chooses.

I think of the scene in the film *The Empire Strikes Back* where Luke Skywalker first meets Yoda. He is expecting to meet a powerful warrior, perhaps the greatest Jedi Master of them all. So, he doesn't even realize that the shriveled up little green guy with the squeaky voice could be him. In fact, Yoda goes so far as to say that war is not what makes one great anyway, though he is an impressive foe in battle when circumstances require his skills.

I think of the character Frodo in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, all of the Hobbits really, tiny little characters with oversized feet who would prefer to putter about their trees in the Shire rather than face the forces of evil. Yet he and they make the difference in the great battle. Appearances can be deceiving. We may not at first recognize great leaders in any arena of life, including God's realm.

I think of real-life people like Mother Teresa and Mahatma Gandhi who were not physically impressive; their voices were not overpowering, to say the least; they did not parade their credentials before everyone they met; but somehow they transformed the world. I

think of a Catholic chaplain I knew in Winston-Salem, Sister Eileen Dennis, a tiny, unassuming woman you might have been tempted to dismiss, but who carried the most powerful sense of God's presence with her of just about anyone I have ever met. When she visited a hospital patient, a sense of grace and peace filled the room.

Appearances can be deceiving. God does not see things as we do. This much we learn from the anointing of David.

We also learn what God's primary criterion of assessment for leaders is – the character of our heart. God does not see as mortals see, 1 Samuel says; they look on outward appearance, God looks on the heart. As we have noted, there is a sharp contrast with Saul here. His primary qualifications for leadership seem to have been his stature and appearance, which may seem rather silly to us. But appearances still affect leadership choices today even in the life of the church, as do equally superficial qualities such as personality.

God's concern goes deeper. The best leaders are those with good hearts, meaning things like strong character, a capacity for both compassion and strength, a high level of integrity and obedience to God's desire. It is a common theme in literature and film, but it is rooted in something old and true, something of God – what matters most is who we are inside, that we have good hearts, strong character.

The question is – does David measure up to this requirement? God has chosen one king who has failed. Could God be wrong again? I mean, God is choosing David now and seeing the goodness in his heart, and he will accomplish great things. He defeats Goliath and thus saves the nation from domination by the Philistines. He expands the boundaries of the nation and stabilizes the government. He recovers the ark and restores proper worship. He accomplishes great things.

But he also has many flaws and failures. Now, failure alone is not problematic. Anyone who leads is going to experience some failure along the way. I will never forget what Habitat for Humanity leader Millard Fuller said when it was noted that the Forsyth County chapter of Habitat had not had a single failure on a loan. "What a shame," he said, "You are obviously not taking enough risks." Habitat's philosophy is to

choose families who can make it and then help them to do so, but the goal is to help people in need. A lack of failure may indicate an unwillingness to take risks. Leadership requires a willingness to fail.

But David's problem is not just failure, alongside his success, but flaws, significant flaws. It's not just that he has an affair with Bathsheba and then has her husband sent to the front to die so that he can add her to his growing list of wives. He fails to discipline his son, Amnon, and to speak up for his daughter, Tamar, when Amnon rapes her. He has unresolved conflict with his son Absalom. To say that David is not perfect is an understatement and a cop-out. He has some major flaws.

And yet, he has many strengths and accomplishments, and as we have noted, he receives more attention in the Hebrew Bible than anyone else, more than Abram, more than Moses, more than Joshua. David's name appears more than a thousand times in the Hebrew Bible and fifty-nine times in the Christian Testament. He is clearly a person of great significance.

In the end, I think he does measure up to God's requirement. It's not that we should dismiss his flaws. Nor is it simply a matter of the good outweighing the bad or the accomplishments being so great that the flaws can be overlooked. It's that when he is confronted, he acknowledges his wrong, seeks forgiveness and changes his ways.

Particularly when the prophet Nathan confronts him about his sin with Bathsheba, David is genuinely contrite and takes responsibility. That's what a real leader does, that's what God sees in David's heart. It's not that he is perfect, he has flaws and makes mistakes. But he takes responsibility for his wrongdoing and repents. Even though pride leads him astray and the temptations of power get to him, he does not lose his soul or his conscience altogether. That's what matters.

Good leaders take responsibility for their flaws and failures and make every effort to change and grow, partly because they want to do and be their best, and partly because they realize there is something more important than them and their egos – the wellbeing of the church, business, group or nation. There is a fine line here. It takes character and charisma to lead. But it takes authentic self-confidence, not the kind of misplaced pride that refuses to acknowledge wrong. People who are

genuinely self-confident and not just covering for inadequacy, are able to admit mistakes and thus look to the interests of those they lead.

I think of a story connected to a predecessor of mine in Richmond. Elmer was an accomplished leader who served on the Christian Life Commission before he pastored the church, and worked for the Foreign Mission Board after that until his retirement. He led the church to accomplish many good things, but this story is about a kind of failure, not really his, the church's, but still a failure and how he responded to it.

Elmer was at the church in the 1970's. In one three-year period the church lost four hundred members due to the integration of the school system and the reality of white flight. A quirk of Virginia government wherein cities and counties are entirely separate entities made it easy to get away from change and many people did, though fewer Baptists than Methodists and Presbyterians left churches in the community.

It was a difficult time and the church needed to find a way forward, a place to focus positive energy with the biased remnant who remained. One proposal coming from the pastor and some key leaders was to allow a house the church owned to become a halfway house for people coming out of prison. It was a bold idea, it addressed a real need but the community opposed the idea and in the end the church voted it down.

It was a tough loss. It was difficult not to take it personally. And Elmer cared passionately about this kind of ministry, serving the least of these in need. Yet he did not pout and give up on the church. He took the long view of things and exhibited incredible patience in helping the church to move forward. He lost this battle but not the war and he knew the difference. In a way, the quality of his leadership was revealed more in his response to failure than in his greatest success. That takes character, real character, real heart; that is what God looks for in leaders.

There is more we can learn about leadership and many other things through David's life. We'll get to some of this later this summer. But this story of anointing presents plenty to ponder. God doesn't see things as we do, God looks on the heart, and what God looks for is not just strength but humility, the willingness to acknowledge failure and flaws, and put the needs of others first.