

SERMON TITLE: "The Appearance of the Heart"
SERMON TEXT: 1 Samuel 16:1-13 and 2 Corinthians 5:11-17
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: June 17, 2018, VBS Sunday & Father's Day, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Since today is Father's Day, I thought I'd focus our attention on one of the Vacation Bible School stories that had a fatherly theme. As you've heard from the VBS children, we actually had two Bible stories this week that included something about fathers. On Wednesday, we learned that Jesus' father Joseph and mother Mary were dismayed that their son had stayed behind at the temple in Jerusalem without telling them. Yes, it was important for Jesus to spend time in his "Father's house," but it was also important to be safe and to communicate respectfully with his parents. No doubt, those were some lessons Father Joseph would continue to teach his son Jesus.

For this sermon, though, I thought it might be good to focus on the other story about a father—the story that comes from First Samuel 16. Along with that story, I've selected some verses from Second Corinthians 5. Let's see what these two passages of scripture tell us about the appearance of the heart.

1—THE BIBLICAL MESSAGE

As we heard, God sent the priest Samuel to the family of Jesse in Bethlehem. King Saul would one day need a successor, and God sent Samuel to find the next king among Jesse's sons. Like most of us would do, the priest Samuel assumed that God was sending him to anoint a person who already had maturity and life experience. Father Jesse was thinking along the same lines, as he proudly brought out his eldest son first. Surely this tall and strong son would make a fine king. But, no, God had not chosen Eliab. Father Jesse then presented son number two, son number three, and son number four. This continued all the way through Jesse's seventh son. Each time, Father Jesse thought, surely, this must be the one. But, each time, God said, "No." God was looking for someone else. Can you imagine how

surprised Father Jesse must have felt when the attention finally turned to his youngest son David, who was out watching the sheep?

Who would have thought that God would choose a boy to become the next king? It goes against all the rules and expectations. Kids don't have a lot of knowledge and experience. Kids haven't yet developed leadership skills. Kids don't impress people with their physical stature. Kids don't present the strong image you want your friends and foes to see. But those were human worries. God told Samuel that it wasn't a person's outward appearance that counted. It wasn't his age, size, athletic skills, charismatic personality, or even his life experience that mattered to God. To God, what matters most is the appearance of the heart.

We see this same theme in the Apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. Apparently, the apostle was disregarded and disrespected by many who looked only on his outward appearance. Especially in the church at Corinth, there were certain people who were always stirring up trouble against Paul. They complained that, while their missionary leader came across strongly in his written letters, he didn't command much authority in person. Maybe they didn't think he was tall enough or muscular enough. Maybe his voice didn't seem deep enough. Maybe they didn't like how he dressed. Or maybe it was the color of his hair or the shape of his nose that caused them to grumble.

We really can't tell what was going on, except to read Paul's response. In 2 Corinthians 5:12, Paul writes, "We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart." In other words, Paul was saying that what matters isn't how one appears to the human eye, but how one's heart looks to God.

2—WHAT DOES A GOOD-LOOKING HEART LOOK LIKE?

So, I guess that begs the question, what does a good-looking heart look like? Fortunately, our scripture lessons give us some helpful answers.

First of all, a good-looking heart is one that's convinced of Christ's love for *all* people. Second Corinthians 5:14 says, "For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all." In other words, Jesus' death on the cross was an act of love for every person on earth—past, present, and future. No people are excluded from the mercy of Christ.

We make a lot of snap judgments about other folks, and even ourselves, based on outward appearances. We measure persons' worth by their physical attributes, their financial success, and their social standing; and, conversely, we discount people because of perceived flaws in appearance. We quickly make assessments of who's in and who's out based on our human perceptions. The Apostle Paul warns us, Don't do it. Don't be fooled into devaluing yourself or others because of the size or shape of your body, your genetic make-up, or other ways that you may seem different from some ideal norm or expectation. Remember, it's the heart which counts, and a good-looking heart is one that's convinced of Christ's love for *all* people.

According to 2 Corinthians 5:17, **a second measure of a good-looking heart is whether or not it has become a new creation.** While the forgiving love of Christ is available to all people, not everyone has yet taken advantage of this opportunity. If we want God to think that we're good-looking, then we need our hearts to be revitalized. We need to be refreshed with God's Spirit. We need to get out of our ruts and open our minds to God's new possibilities. God doesn't care how many wrinkles are on our faces. What we need is a facelift for our attitudes and behaviors. We need a new outlook on life. We need to allow God a chance to turn us into new creatures.

Henry Ford once said that "anyone who stops learning is old, whether at 20 or 80. Anyone who keeps learning stays young."¹ The same can be said for spiritual renewal. Anyone who fails to grow in Christian faith will decline in spiritual vitality and become weak in heart.

I'm so glad for the children who attended Vacation Bible School this past week and for the spiritual concepts and stories they heard. But I hope they never think that they've learned it all already.

The Bible and God are so big that we all need to be lifelong students. As our Wednesday VBS story told us, even God's son Jesus had some more learning to do. Even though, at age 12, he was already very knowledgeable about the scriptures, Jesus still needed to grow in wisdom about how to apply those holy words to his relationships with his parents and other people.

A heart is a muscle, so it has to be working and exercising to be healthy. It can't sit still or be static and unchanging. That's why a good-looking heart needs regular updates. It has to become a new creation.

A third measure of a good-looking heart is a readiness to receive God's Holy Spirit. If we jump back to the story of Samuel's search for a king, we read that when Samuel finally anointed young David with oil, "the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward." David's heart looked good to God because David was prepared to receive an infusion of power. He was like an empty gas tank waiting to be filled.

On Friday, we learned the same thing about the disciples who gathered in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost. They were sad because Jesus had died on the cross. Yes, he had risen from the dead, and that was wonderful. But now he had ascended to heaven with God, and they missed him. In their grief, the disciples felt empty and didn't know what to do. But then, on the Day of Pentecost, God's Holy Spirit came upon them with power. God got their attention with wind and fiery flames. And then God filled the disciples with the ability and power to speak in other languages, so people from all over the world could hear about Jesus and accept his forgiving love in their hearts.

You see, we don't have to be mighty all on our own. In fact, sometimes our own self-sufficiency just gets in the way. What's important is that we have a yearning and a hunger for God's Spirit, so that we can then use that divine power to serve Christ in the world. A good-looking heart is one that is eager, willing, and ready to receive the strength of God's Holy Spirit.

CONCLUSION

Maybe Father's Day is a good time to hear this message. I think some dads get hung up in the idea that they need to appear independently strong and self-sufficient. They think they need to project a tough-guy exterior in order to protect themselves and their families. They focus so much on their responsibility to make a living for their family that they forget about the appearance of their heart. But there's more to keeping up fatherly appearances than bringing home the bacon and keeping the yard trimmed. Being a super hero father is also about using your heart to connect your children to God.

I like what Don Osgood wrote in his book called *Fatherbond*. He says,

It is the gift of fathers to feel the Presence of God and bless their children with it. Placing your hand on your son's or daughter's head when you pray is a special privilege that all fathers have, whether it is each night at bedtime . . . or in the hospital when they are sick or at their wedding. It is your privilege to bless, handed down from Old Testament days. In so doing, you prepare your son or daughter for the Presence of God.

[Osgood continues,] . . . As fathers, we have a special power to call on this strength for our children. When we fix our eyes on the Christ and call his name, we receive all the power of God it is possible for us to receive. And it spills over into family members so they can receive it and become strong beyond imagination.²

Whether fathers or mothers, daughters or sons, what really counts is not our outward appearance. What matters to God is the appearance of the heart.

¹ *Sourcebook of Wit & Wisdom*, (Communications Resources: Canton, OH, 1996), p. 21.

²As printed in *Circuit Rider*, June 1997, p. 17.