

Tracy Daub
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1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Mark 1:16-20

LOOKING UPON THE HEART

One by one, the sons of Jesse passed before the prophet Samuel. First came Eliab. As the eldest son he was the natural choice to be anointed the next king. And on top of that, he was also tall and strong and good looking. So Samuel thought, “Surely this is the one to be anointed the next king of Israel!” But God said “he’s not the one.” Then came the next son, Abinadab. But again God said no, not him. After Abinadab came Shammah but once again God said, “not him.” Seven sons of Jesse passed before Samuel--seven strong, capable sons--and each time God said, “not him.”

When Samuel had seen them all he asked, “Is this everyone?” And the family said, “well, there’s the youngest whose taking care of the sheep. But he’s just a boy.” And Samuel said, “Go get him.” And when David was brought in from the pasture, Samuel saw him--and God said to Samuel, “This is the one!” And Samuel got out his horn filled with oil and anointed the boy David the next king of Israel--David, who as the Bible will reveal, was a very flawed and imperfect human being but who would also go on to use his skills and talents to become the most beloved king of Israel.

When he was out in the pasture tending his sheep, David certainly never expected to be called upon to be the next king. And certainly no one else did either. After all, he was just a boy, the youngest brother with the least seniority. But God told Samuel, “the Lord does not see as mortals see; *they* look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

This story is one of the many “call” stories in the Bible—occasions when God calls someone into service. And in almost every case, the person chosen in these biblical accounts is a

surprising choice. They do not match people's expectations. Samuel came to Jesse's farm looking for a leader for the people, a leader for the nation. And the one chosen by God and called by God did not fit the expectations of what a leader should look like. And that is because rather than assessing the outward appearance or credentials of a person, God looks upon the heart.

As Presbyterians, we believe that every one of us is "called" by God into service and into ministry. I may be the pastor, but Presbyterians affirm that through our baptisms all of us are ministers, called by Christ to be his disciples. In our reading today from Mark's gospel, we see how Jesus called his disciples from among ordinary, uneducated fishermen. He did not sit down and vet them to determine their qualifications or demand to see a resume. He called these ordinary and flawed people, just as he calls us ordinary and flawed people today, to learn from him about the realm of God, and then to live and proclaim this good news in the course of their lives.

Among all of us who are called by God into discipleship to Christ, some individuals are also called to special leadership positions—similar to David's being called into leadership in today's reading. In the Presbyterian Church, there are three such leadership positions: Elder, Deacon, and Minister of the Word and Sacrament—which is what we call the Pastor. Each year at our annual meeting in February, our congregation elects new elders and deacons to fill leadership positions for our church. Typically, we would ordain and install these new officers shortly after the annual meeting, but this year, because of Covid-19 we were not worshipping in person at that time. So today we will officially ordain and install these newly elected officers to their positions.

Now, a word about the office of Elder and Deacon. Presbyterians understand these congregational leadership positions differently than other Christian denominations regard their elected leaders. And this difference is significant. Presbyterians do not merely *elect* leaders to serve the congregation but we also *ordain* Elders and Deacons to these positions. Just as we ordain clergy to serve as Ministers of the Word and Sacrament, to serve as pastors, the Presbyterian Church ordains Elders and Deacons. That is not true in other Protestant denominations. We ordain our leaders because we understand these to be ministries where one is called by God and the community of believers to serve Christ in a special way. Elders and Deacons are called and chosen to lead and guide the congregation in the way of Christ. And so they are ordained—which is very much like what Samuel did to David in our story today when he anointed David with oil. Ordination, like anointing, is a ritual of designating someone for a special task or responsibility in service to God.

What is that task or responsibility? Let me share with you just a bit of what the Presbyterian Book of Order says about the task and responsibilities of Elders and Deacons. According to the Book of Order, those elected to serve as Elders should be “persons of wisdom and maturity of faith, having demonstrated skills in leadership and being compassionate in spirit. Ruling elders are so named not because they ‘lord it over’ the congregation but because they are chosen by the congregation to discern and measure its fidelity to the Word of God, and to strengthen and nurture its faith and life. Ruling elders, together with ministers of the Word and Sacrament, exercise leadership, government, spiritual discernment, and discipline and have responsibilities for the life of a congregation as well as the whole church, including ecumenical relationships.”

Regarding Deacons, the Presbyterian Book of Order states, “The ministry of deacon as set forth in Scripture is one of compassion, witness, and service, sharing in the redeeming love of Jesus Christ for the poor, the hungry, the sick, the lost, the friendless, the oppressed, those burdened by unjust policies or structures, or anyone in distress.” Who should serve as Deacon? Well the Book of Order states, “Persons of spiritual character, honest repute, exemplary lives, brotherly and sister love, sincere compassion, and sound judgment should be chosen for this ministry.”

It’s pretty clear from these descriptions that being an Elder is much more than deciding whether we should fix the roof this year or next year—and being a Deacon is much more than knowing how to use the church coffee maker. These descriptions reveal that these positions are ministries in service to Christ. And once a person is ordained as an Elder or Deacon, they are ordained for life. We elect Elders and Deacons to serve for a 3 year period of time. But once their time of service ends, they retain their ordination. They can be called upon to serve again at some time or even can move to another part of the country and join a different Presbyterian church and their ordination remains and they can serve again as an Elder or Deacon if called upon. And that is because ordination is more than just serving a term on a board or committee. Being an Elder or Deacon is a call to serve Christ--and that is a lifetime calling. Ordination makes it clear that this is much more than just getting elected. This is a calling. This is a ministry.

And here is what is really the key ingredient to understanding these ordained positions of Elder and Deacon. The individuals we elect and ordain as Elders and Deacons are *not* elected and ordained to represent the wishes or opinions of the congregation. Let me say that again. The individuals we elect and ordain as Elders and Deacons are *not* elected and ordained to represent

the wishes and opinions of the congregation. They are elected and ordained to represent the way of Jesus Christ. Of course, these leaders will want to serve this congregation well and to respect its members, and consider its members' wishes. But Elders and Deacons are ordained to represent the way of Christ above all else. And they are ordained to lead us and nurture us in the way of Christ. You, the congregation, elect and ordain them because you have looked into their hearts and you have seen people you trust to lead you in the way of Christ. And sometimes, sometimes the decisions of these leaders in serving the way of Christ might not always be popular with the entire congregation.

And that means that those of you who are ordained as Elders and Deacons--those we are ordaining today or those of you who were ordained long ago--you have an awesome responsibility. This congregation looks to you to guide us and lead us in the way of Jesus Christ—the way of love, compassion, justice, mercy, and generosity. And sometimes it takes great courage to lead us in this way because some decisions won't be popular or easy or convenient.

This is intimidating for sure! We should all be intimidated by this calling. We are but ordinary people. And this is an awesome responsibility that is asked of us. But just remember: God seeks out the ordinary to do God's extraordinary work. Perfection is not required. None of Jesus' first disciples were perfect people. And King David was very much an imperfect human being. This congregation does not ask for perfection from our leaders. Rather it is your heart that we seek. God has looked upon your heart and called you. And we have looked upon your heart and called you. What we seek from you is for you to have a heart for Christ and to help us discover that heart within ourselves.