

“The Heart of the Matter”

I Samuel 15:34-16:13; Mark 19:13-15

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

June 15, 2014 – 2nd Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

We live in a society today that seems to favor the strong, the attractive, the aggressive. These are the folks who seem to get picked most often for leadership positions. Give that person an MBA and some influential contacts, and they're ready for moving up the corporate ladder. If they're handy with a football and have unflagging drive, then they have the makings of the next sports hero. Ambitious individuals, with pull and some big money behind them, can go on to successful political careers.

Before we're too hard on our own times, however, we might want to take a look back in history. Even the Bible tells us that such supposed advantage has been part of life for a lot of years. This is evident in today's Old Testament reading. It spends considerable time describing Saul as first king of the Hebrew people, and then lifting up his exploits. Saul was a natural for the job because he was both strong and handsome. As the story goes on, however, it's also clear that there were some key qualities missing in him.

Saul looked good but, in testing, was found to be lacking. It becomes evident that a new king is needed. Samuel is the one designated to identify God's chosen replacement. This time the criteria will be different, however. First of all, outward appearance will be of little consequence. The emphasis now is what is inside that person. The inner self is now at the heart of the matter. As we see, David is the one who is selected and, over time, he proves to be the right person. As the text reminds us, “the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks upon the heart.”

This awareness about what's truly important about a person applies not only to picking kings, but also reveals what is important about us. The things we may value and cultivate in ourselves may not be crucial at all to God. Often we let culture define our desirable attributes and then assume that God has the same list. That's an assumption we would do well to question.

“For what will you gain,” says Jesus, “if you win the whole world but lose your life.” A person can strive after many goals, but not all will bring us to what we are really seeking. Life is full of dead ends masquerading as true direction. We have to give real thought and attention to sorting out the truly important from the trivial. Hold that thought for a few moments.

Today, of course, is Father's Day. In some denominations it's also the second part of a celebration called the Festival of the Home. It's a day to think about the role that our father, or a father figure, played in our life. When it's still possible, it's also an important time to communicate back that gratitude and affection.

Many of us here are parents ourselves or, someday, will be. When that's a role we take conscientiously, we will strive to be the best parent we can. We want to be adequate to the many responsibilities involved. Not that there's any such thing as a perfect parent—ask any teenager if you want confirmation of that. Still, we want to do our very best.

Parenting is one of the most underrated callings in life. Our preparation for it is anything but systematic and the sources that teach us are very mixed in their quality. We can read books about parenting, and should; but most of what we learn comes from observation. We see good examples and bad examples all the time. The problem is that they all tend to get mixed up and we have to sort them all out.

Parenting doesn't leave off with biological connection. We see that quite clearly in places like the church. Here we are linked as a family by our common faith. And like any family, we have some shared responsibilities in bringing up the children in our midst. What they experience in the congregation will have an impact upon them both now and in later life.

Children are very quick to perceive feelings. They sense if you are interested and care about them. Even if you are not negative toward a child, indifference alone delivers a message. So it's not only what we do, but what we don't do, that is important.

The greatest gift we can give a child, whether our own or within our extended family, is a relationship based on caring and concern. It's reaching from our heart to theirs. What children need is not a projected image, not some kind of cardboard figure, not some super hero. What they need are people who know themselves, understand what's really important in life, and will take the time to get to know them on that basis.

Now I imagine we've all heard the term "bench mark." Probably we've used it in conversation from time to time, but may not know what it refers to. Well, a bench mark is a round metal plate, about four inches in diameter. It's embedded in a concrete post or rock, something that cannot move even a fraction of an inch. Bench marks are used by surveyors and engineers to make all their other calculations. Everything is planned and constructed based on those reliable bench marks.

Well, in building our lives, the same applies to us. Our most important bench marks are not found in our strength—though that may be desirable. They are not found in our looks—which are nice. They are not found in our forcefulness—which may get things done. They are not found in our acquisitions or our cleverness or our ability to outmaneuver others for personal gain.

No, our bench marks are always sited in our inner qualities. Our bench marks are internal attributes. They are the heart of who we are. They are the things that will allow us to leave life, at least in small ways, better than we found it. They will be marked in the relationships we have as the positive impact we make on others' lives.

Our text for today reminds us of that truth. What David needed to succeed was all inside of him, and that's where the truly important qualities are for us as well. When we build on those inner properties then we live out our days within God's intention as a person, as a parent, and as a bearer of the Good News of Jesus Christ in the world around us.