

Chosen
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer M. Gingras
October 19, 2021

1 Samuel 16:1-13, Psalm 51: 10-14

Most of us know what it is like to feel excluded.

Show of hands... have you ever had to sit at the kids table?

Whenever there was a big gathering at my grandmother's, be it Thanksgiving, Christmas or Easter... a card table for the kids was set up in the kitchen. That's where me, my brother, and all my younger cousins ate our meal, while the older people sat at the fancy table in the dining room.

I didn't graduate from that table until I brought my fiancé Clark home one Christmas and Grandma squished us both in, somehow.

Truth be told - I was happy to be with my cousins, and some of my happiest moments were spent at the kids table. But I also remember having this vaguely unsettled feeling that I was missing out on something important in the next room, at the grown-up table, just because I was young.

The warmth of nostalgia coupled with feeling left out. We can feel both things, can't we?

Let me tell you a secret... sometimes adults still have to sit at the kid's table. It's not that we are forced to literally sit at some rickety card table in some kitchen. It's just that there are very few spaces where everyone gets to be invited to the big table, the important table, where all the cool kids have gathered.

I'm sorry. I wish I could tell you otherwise, but grownups can get left out, too. Maybe because we aren't wealthy enough, or successful enough, or pretty enough, or important enough or connected enough. And that's a shame.

In today's Bible story, we are told that God is looking for a new king for Israel and that God has sent his prophet Samuel to find him. It isn't the first time that Samuel has gone looking for a king. Earlier in the story, he anointed Saul to be king, and it was easy to see why.

The Bible says that Saul was *"as handsome a young man as could be found anywhere in Israel, and he was a head taller than anyone else"*¹. Saul stood out in the crowd!

It is regularly pointed out to me by people I love that at 5'4" I am the shortest person in my immediate family. Every time I need to reach a bowl on the top shelf I think - that there are many advantages to being tall!

Did you know, that in Western countries, a jump from the 25th percentile of height to the 75th (which works out to be about four or five inches) is associated with a salary increase between 9 and 15 percent? Another analysis suggests that an extra inch in height is worth almost \$800 a year in elevated earnings. One researcher told Malcolm Gladwell for his book *Blink*, *"If you take this over the course of a 30-year career and compound it, we're talking about a tall person enjoying literally hundreds of thousands of dollars of earnings advantage"*² over a person of shorter stature.

But no matter how tall and successful he ultimately was, when Saul won't listen to God and refuses to carry out God's instructions, it is decided that his days in the office are numbered and it's time to start looking for a new king.

This time around, we are told that God will search for a leader whose heart beats to the rhythm of God's own heart, like the psalmist wrote in the second reading that Linda shared. God sends Samuel to a man named Jesse who lives in Bethlehem, because the future king is one of Jesse's sons.

Understandably, Samuel is a little worried about his mission. It turns out that choosing a new king while the old one is in power can get a person into a lot of trouble! He decides to play it safe, saying that he will go to Bethlehem to make a sacrifice (something that no-one will see as unusual). When he arrives, Samuel invites Jesse and his sons to join him in worship, which will give him an under-the-radar opportunity to select the new king from among them.

When Samuel arrives in little old Bethlehem, the elders are anxious to have such an important person with them. Prophets can make people nervous! Samuel tells them he's come in peace, to sacrifice. And he invites them and Jesse's family to join him.

¹ 1 Samuel 9:2

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/05/the-financial-perks-of-being-tall/393518/>

Now think about this for a moment... an important person comes to your hometown and invites your entire family to join them for a meal. I don't know how this is even decided, but Google says that in 2021 former wrestler and actor Dwayne "the Rock" Johnson is the most famous person in the world. OK, maybe he's not for you.

But imagine the excitement if YOUR favorite celebrity, sports star or musician walked into the front door of the church, sat down beside you, and asked your family to join them at Sunday Brunch? Would you be excited? Certainly! Now imagine how you'd feel if your family told you that you had to stay home and do the laundry. How would you feel?

Jesse brings seven of his eight sons to that gathering with Samuel. His youngest, David is told to stay home and take care of the sheep. Imagine all the initial excitement David must have felt to learn of this celebrity visit, followed almost immediately by the disappointment of being relegated to the kids table (metaphorically).

When the rest of Jesse's family assembles before Samuel, the prophet was pretty sure he knew whom God has chosen. I mean there was Eliab – he was a no-brainer, the tallest, strongest, best looking of the bunch. But God tells Samuel something like, *"Looks aren't everything. Don't be impressed with his looks and stature. I've already eliminated him. God judges persons differently than humans do. Men and women look at the face; God looks into the heart."*

Jesse then introduces the rest of his boys. Abinadab? No, not him. Shammah? Not, him either. One by one the sons are introduced and one by one Samuel declares that the Lord has not chosen them. So, Samuel asks Jesse: *"Is this it? Are there no more sons?"* and Jesse begrudgingly admits that there is one more. The runt, the youngest boy, is out in the fields tending to the sheep. Samuel tells Jesse to call for him. And when he arrives the Lord says to Samuel: *"Up on your feet! Anoint him! This is the one."*

David is not the leader most would have chosen. Left to his own devices, David was not the one that Samuel would have chosen. But David is God's choice.

God doesn't want an ordinary king, someone who will build up military power, cultivate international relationships and develop a huge court. No, God wants someone special. Someone who will read regularly from God's law and learn to obey. And God finds this person in David (for a while, anyway).

This is what most of us would call a Cinderella story. The overlooked child, the neglected one, the youngest, is the new hope! Chosen above all others to be King. We like stories like this, maybe because we like to root for the underdog!

Especially when we are smarting from the painful rejection of others.

Especially when we have been hurt by being overlooked for not meeting some external standard of beauty or perfection.

Especially when we are told that we are not smart enough or strong enough or old enough or young enough...

It is nice to know that at some times, in some places people are chosen, not because of how they look on the outside, but because of what is on the inside.

Because of their character, their heart.

We are also chosen, chosen to be God's beloved children and conformed to likeness of his son, Jesus. We aren't chosen because we've met some external standard or are particularly the best and the brightest. Here is what the Apostle Paul says to the church at Corinth: "*Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth...*"³

We aren't chosen (I'll dare to say), because we have especially pure hearts, or that we've got stronger convictions or clearer consciences than our neighbors. We make mistakes, but we apologize and pick ourselves up again. Paul reminds us in the letter to the Romans that: "*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*"⁴.

So why then are we chosen? We are chosen because God has determined to make our hearts beat according to his rhythm of God's love and mercy. Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ 1 Corinthians 1:26

⁴ Romans 3:23