

“Beloved of God”

“Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose,”¹ so wrote Gertrude Stein. William Shakespeare wrote, “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”² While those are true in their fashion, names are important. I am fascinated by names of in the Bible. Biblical names often give us clues to the nature of the individuals and to the arc of a story. Sometimes, as in the case of today’s reading from the First Book of Samuel, they can also be ironic.

First of all we have the protagonist of this account, Samuel. His name means “God hears.” We know that Samuel was born to a formerly barren mother, Hannah, who pleaded with God to give her a son. She then dedicated Samuel to God and he was raised as a servant in the Tabernacle of God. God heard her plea.

Then there is Saul, the king of Israel in the narrative. His name means “Asked for.” As in the people of Israel asked for a king and they got one in Saul. Once we get to Bethlehem the names become even more compelling.

First there is Jesse which probably means “gift” or “oblation,” for it is Jesse who is giving a son to God to be anointed as king. That makes sense, but the names of the sons, whom Samuel encounters, from oldest to youngest, seem discordant with the narrative. Eliab means “God is my father.” That would seem to be a perfect name for a king, but not so says the Lord. Next is Abinadab which means “father of a vow.” Another seemingly excellent name for one to be anointed as king, but once again it is not to be. Next we have Shammah which could mean astonishment. Yet again God tells Samuel to pass over him. Finally, after having each of Jesse’s seven sons stand before him, Samuel is bereft. How can he anoint one of Jesse’s sons as God commanded if God also says none of them are fit?

It is at this point that Samuel asks Jesse, “Are all of your sons here?” It is almost as an afterthought that Jesse tells Samuel there is one more son who is out tending the sheep. Samuel requests that Jesse to send for him.

When this youngest son arrives it is then that Samuel gets the word from the Lord that this is the one he is to anoint. The name of this son is David, which means “beloved.” With the knowledge of his name and its meaning in hand we know that this is the one God would choose. It is not that the other sons are deficient, as we can see by their names; so much as David is the one who is beloved of God.

What adds to the remarkable nature of God’s choice is that in a patriarchal society the oldest son takes precedence over the youngest. Point in fact, David’s father, having paraded seven sons in front of Samuel, has

¹ From “Sacred Emily” by Gertrude Stein.

² From “Romeo and Juliet” Act 2, scene 1 by William Shakespeare

forgotten that he has one more. David in the scheme of things is the least important and not worth being considered. It takes a special request to get him in the line-up.

For those who have ever been the least favored child, awkward, not athletic, shy, or overlooked this might feel like a triumph. They can think, “Someone like me can be the favorite of God.” Remember that earlier in the narrative God tells Samuel “The LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”³

Despite this admonition from the Lord, we humans continue to be prone to look on the outward appearance. We are also prone to forget those who are not in our inner circle. In this time of COVID-19 with the necessary social distancing, isolation, and lockdowns we are likely to forget some folks. I expect most people do not do so intentionally, but it happens.

That is why, more than ever, we need to see as the Lord sees. We need to see those who are taking risks on our behalf—medical practitioners and first responders naturally come to mind. Let us not forget those who work in the grocery stores, post offices, manufacturing, utilities, communications and transportation who are not getting to isolate. We depend on them for so much and they are easily overlooked. Thank them and pray for their wellbeing.

Also, do not forget your neighbors. Social media has helped us become more connected with those who live across the country or around the world, but it has also helped us become isolated in our own neighborhood. Check in on each other via the phone or internet. Do what the Italians are doing by singing to each other. I saw a video of people in Baltimore who come out on the street, keeping their distance, to sing a song each day. I saw them singing the “Star Spangled Banner” on video. It might not have been as operatic as the Italians, but it was a great way of sharing community even in this time of enforced isolation.

God tells us in this account from Samuel that what comes to mind first, what is seemingly the obvious, and what seems to be the natural order of things is not the way of God. Love your neighbors and check in on them. Love the unseen but essential and give thanks for their selfless work. Love the frightened, lonely, forlorn, and disadvantaged. Do not forget about them. Pray for everyone.

I will finish as I did last week, by quoting Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew. “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family you did it to me.”⁴ When we care for those who are overlooked, underappreciated, or forgotten, we are serving Christ. There is no holier calling than this in all the whole wide world.

³ 1 Samuel 16:7b

⁴ Matthew 25:40 NRSV