

ON FACE VALUE

1 SAM 16:1-13

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LENT 4

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By all accounts, Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a strong and popular president of the American people during the Great Depression and World War 2. They could listen to him on the radio, they would read his speeches and ideas in the newspapers, and they valued him as a leader for their time.

Nevertheless, if he was alive today, he would not have a chance of running for office. He would not have this chance because he was a victim of polio and confined to a wheelchair. In today's era of television, people would evaluate him as a physical cripple and weakling. They would measure him by his appearance and not the quality of his convictions or the spirit of his heart.

When Joe Clark was running for Prime Minister (the first time), I think it was my Mom who said, "I'd vote for the man if only he had a chin." It was, I believe her wittiest remark ever. Obviously she was not alone for when Brian Mulroney replaced Joe Clark as leader of the Progressive Conservative party, Canada finally had a leader with a chin that would drag on the ground when he bent over. Mulroney was photogenic; he had a tone and timbre to his voice that was so rich and deep that when he was interviewed on television, your dishes would rattle in the cupboards.

In any political campaign, the defining moment to which people turn always seems to be the public debate.

It's always amazed me that we will a person to lead our country for the next four years based on how constructively belligerent they are during a two hour public argument.

Of course, Hollywood and the mass media encourages us to take people on "face value": if they have a cute face, then we value them.

When a movie or television script calls for a mentally handicapped person, the casting director finds a fully capable person to act retarded. When there is a need for a blind person, a sighted person is taught to act blind. When there is a need for ugly person, directors take a beautiful person and add just enough makeup to make the actor less attractive than anyone else on the cast.

Directors do this because they believe that we as an audience will not respect, will not appreciate, will not feel compassion for people who are truly handicapped, or ugly, or brain damaged.

Maybe they are right.

We've always had high expectations of how our public figures appear. On face value, we expect them to look perfect. The television series *The West Wing* is based on the premise that a Nobel prize winning economist becomes the President of the United States. He is a compassionate, articulate and very intelligent leader.

The writers devoted an entire season of *The West Wing* to ask the question, "What would the American people think if they knew their President might have MS?" The conclusion is that Americans aren't truly interested in the ideas or values of their presidential candidates but how well they look in front of the camera.

They aren't alone.

Our first lesson today tells an interesting tale. It had me confused so that I put a question to a friend of mine

quite proficient in Hebrew. She in turn posted my question to some Hebrew scholars she knows across the continent and so I am indebted to Jordan Penkower, Edward Dessau, Dr. Hayim Sheynin, and Rebecca Landau for their help and insight into this passage.

Samuel is sent to anoint one of Jesse's sons as the new King of Israel. Samuel and Jesse "do lunch" and as Samuel meets Jesse's boys, Samuel is about to select Eliab because obviously Eliab is a strapping young man who is tall and strong and good looking. But the Lord says to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature...for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." (1 Sa 16:6-7). So Samuel works his way down the line of all of Jesse's sons and none is found suitable.

There is one more son who isn't there; David is out in the fields looking after the sheep. Messengers are quickly dispatched to bring him to the feast. When he arrives, how does the editor of our story describe him? Is he described by the qualities of his heart? Is he described by his leadership abilities, his values, or his faithfulness?

Even here—even though "the Lord does not see as mortals see, but looks on the heart"—the first description we have from the editor points to David's physical beauty; he "had beautiful eyes, and was handsome" (v. 12). Even though the editor knows that God looks on the heart, his first response is to evaluate David on "face value." It seems that some habits are hard to break.

We so easily confuse imperfection with moral failure. A skin blemish or a bad hair day is all it takes to knock a person out of contention. In talking to one of my directors this past week, he mentioned that he doesn't use the interview to decide if he is going to hire somebody; he

usually makes his decision as he is walking the candidate to his office *just before* the interview! He evaluates on "face value!" If you don't look good, you can't do the job!

Microsoft spends more money marketing bad software than it does developing good software. It knows how to play this game. It's all about face value. Look the perfect part and people will buy you.

From malnourished runway models to airbrushed photos in fashion magazines, from PR consultants helping political and business leaders craft the perfect 10 second sound bite, to spin doctors and speech writers, modern society is all about style over substance.

The Cosmetic Industry is worth over \$66 billion a year.¹ Over half a million Americans aged 65 or older get cosmetic surgery every year.²

It's no wonder then that the same question comes up in our gospel reading too: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (Jn 9:2). After all, on face value a blind man is an imperfect man and this must be someone's fault.

Jesus rejects the question. Imperfection at face value is not a failure; it is a quality of our humanity. We need to look deeper to find the true value of a person.

Today, David is not remembered for his handsomeness or his beautiful eyes but for his leadership qualities, for his faithfulness to God, his repentant attitude when he failed, and his concern for his people.

Like it or not, these are of course, the qualities by which we will all be measured.

And here we are confronted with a double standard. we don't want to be evaluated on face value; even though

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/STYLE/9606/29/american.beauty/index.html>

² <http://archives.cnn.com/2002/HEALTH/08/16/seniors.plastic.surgery/index.html>

it is often the standard by which we view others. We want people to see us as God sees us, by looking on our hearts.

And so we need to see others as God sees them too.