

The Smell Test (Based on 1 Samuel 16:1-13)

Good morning! I am so glad to be offering you a message today. I want to thank Pastor Craig for all of the support that he offers me as a candidate for ordained ministries, and I want to thank you for your commitment to vital ministries and missions. I appreciate the support you gave when I was an Alateen group sponsor here, and I love how you have redesigned your building to support United Methodist mission teams. What a blessing it is to share our work in faith; United Methodists are not afraid to be “down in the muck” of human need wherever it may be, first to arrive, last to leave, for as long as it takes, no matter what.

Our “down in the muck” traditions seem to be the focus of today’s lectionary readings. I know that some of you study the lectionary together each week, and as I studied along with you, the story of Samuel anointing David spoke to me. It highlights a key issue that I wrestle with as someone called to church leadership.

You see, it’s great that our United Methodist traditions draw us into the muck of life in service to God, but David’s story invites us to look not only at who goes in to the muck, but also at who comes out of it. And who comes out of the muck of Jesse’s sheepfold, to be anointed by God, is a leader - a leader who everyone thought was far away from God’s notion of leadership. David is a leader who passed God’s “smell test.” Are we raising up leaders who can do the same? Will you pray with me, please. [PRAYER]

I support several ministries and missions at First United Methodist Church Middletown as a seminarian, but one in particular has been close to my heart. Like many American cities, Middletown is home to a refugee family from the Middle East. Our church serves in a coalition of local churches, mosques, and synagogues who help the family to restart their life. My main role has been helping the family’s father to get a Connecticut driver’s license. Well, if our DMV system can be challenging for folks like us, imagine what it’s like to be a refugee at DMV, with only a passing knowledge of English, in the middle of its noise, confusion, and frayed nerves. It’s hard, and you need help.

On the day of the father’s driving test, my car, that he was going to drive, was out of commission. The good news is that a coalition volunteer stepped up to offer his car for the day. The bad news is that the car’s insurance papers were out of date, and so we scrambled at the DMV office between the counter, a cell phone and the car to get things in order. And then, as I started to get frazzled, I managed to drop some important papers. Fortunately, a man in the waiting area, who had watched all this, helped me to pick them up. As he handed me the papers, he smiled, and said, “Hang in there. A good shepherd smells like the sheep.”

The wisdom of this man’s words shines on today’s story of David’s anointing by Samuel. Samuel, a prophet of God, had anointed Saul king of Israel by popular demand, with God’s reluctant consent. After Saul’s reign as king had become a mess, God told Samuel to go to Bethlehem to anoint a replacement for Saul from the sons of Jesse, a prominent Judean. 1

Samuel 16 doesn't give us much detail about David; we learn that David was a boy who was "ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome." The Hebrew word for "ruddy" used in this story's original text might mean that David had striking red hair. It seems odd that David's good looks are mentioned, because God had just told Samuel to ignore the appearance of Jesse's sons, and to look at their hearts.

Well, there's a more obvious reason why Samuel had to ignore David's outer appearance to anoint him with fragrant oil - David was a shepherd, and he smelled like the sheep! David could have looked as handsome as king Saul apparently did, or as his older and more honored brothers, but how could anyone trying to pick a king for God's people not want to ignore someone who smelled like a barnyard, no matter how nice he looked? And as the youngest child of a large family, David was not valued much in the first place; he was just an afterthought - his father Jesse hadn't even bothered to call David in to meet Samuel at first. A child, a stinky shepherd child at that, was off the map of everyone's expectations for God's anointed leader of Israel, including his own father!

And yet, this was exactly God's plan for God's people. The comfortable bets, the safe bets, the insiders, the ones who would not rattle the teacups of the elites of Israel or Judah, the ones who had all of the status, the connections, the honored seats at gatherings, the ones who smelled nice, were gently put aside by God, in favor of a red-haired kid covered in sheep grease.

As Christians, we may be tempted to take God's choice of David as a king for granted. After all, it fits in so nicely with our own view of how God walked humbly upon the earth as Jesus, a poor man from a poor town. Jesus would reveal God's glory by reclaiming humble people, such as the blind man in today's gospel reading from John. We love the notion that humble leaders are the best leaders.

Well, compared to king Saul, who was lying, posturing, and inside dealing his way to failure as a leader, certainly David's humble origins offer us a more comfortable alternative. But then, there's that smell. We say that we like humility, but we may forget that leading humbly is not just about a posture, or a soft voice, or a good heart, or a willingness to act modest at appropriate social moments. If we're being honest, we'll admit that leading humbly is mostly about what God asks us to do in humble circumstances, for the humble, as the humble, stink and all.

I worked in New York City for many years, and pretty often I would bump into all sorts of famous people. At hot dog stands, in museums, or just walking down the street - you name it, they would pop up like gophers out of nowhere. One day in New York, I bumped into Mother Teresa, the missionary who comforted poor and forgotten people in Calcutta, India. As she and her followers passed by in their simple clothes, I reached out and touched her briefly and gently on her shoulder. She was shaped by God to be humble, with the humble, helping the humble, and you could sense how she was a fiercely humble shepherd for her sheep. She smelled like God's sheep.

Psalm 23 from today's lectionary reminds us that even God smells like God's sheep. God the shepherd meets the sheep's needs, no matter what. God works to bring them peace, no matter what. God offers them the rod and the staff of righteousness and salvation, no matter what. God pours the fragrant oil of deliverance on them and feeds them generously when defeat and destruction are near, no matter what. God, covered in sheep grease, offers stinky and obedient sheep goodness and mercy, not in the barnyard, but in God's royal home, not because we are stinky, but because we are God's sheep - no matter what.

You see, our God knows what it's like to be a shepherd, and so God knew that David had what Israel needed, not because he was modest, but because David had the heart of a humble shepherd king. David was a warrior, fighting fiercely to defend the sheep of Israel and Judah, no matter what. David stuck his neck out for God in public, no matter what, inviting his sheep to rejoice like joyful children, with leaping, dancing and music, when the word of God came to Jerusalem in the ark of the covenant. David showed his sheep true humility, admitting to God that his heart had become stinky when his sinfulness led to adultery and murder, offering God repentance to cleanse his heart through God's forgiveness, trusting in God, no matter what.

And most important of all, David's heir would be a perfect royal shepherd for all of God's sheep, no matter what - our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who washed the stink of our sins in the pure and holy blood of his heart, a King who shepherds us today; here; now. Jesus is calling us in God's Holy Spirit to trust that there is no stink too bad in our life that would separate us from God or God's sheep through faith. Like David, our anointment for redemption in the blood of Christ calls us to be courageous defenders of faith, publicly joyful in our faith, and humbly repentant in our faith, as signs of hope and reconciliation for God's sheep, growing together as God's flock in God's loving grace towards Christian perfection.

God calls us not only to be God's sheep, but to be shepherd children of the royal shepherd, Jesus Christ, for God's sake, and to raise up new generations of passionately dedicated shepherds, for the world's sake. As God lifted up David from the sheepfold to serve God, so must the church lift up today's Christian leaders from the muck of everyday life to lead people into God's holy ways. The shepherds who we call disciples have lifted up new leaders from the sheep of the Shepherd King for nearly 2,000 years, with passion and grace, even unto death, and have grown the royal shepherd's flock. The shepherd John Wesley, who was thrown out of the churches of a king, mounted a hilltop in a field near Bristol, England, reclaimed the forgotten sheep of that nation and of the world, for the sake of the Shepherd King, and lifted up from them new shepherds to grow our true King's flock. And the shepherds called United Methodists are called by the living God to care for and grow that flock, for the sake of a world that needs the Shepherd King's redeeming grace to transform every person and every creature made by the King.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, we should rejoice gladly, loudly, enthusiastically, and as widely as the Lord will allow us, from the highest hills to the broadest seas, that through God's grace we can take the smell test that God provides us in Christ, and declare to the world,

in the light of God's Holy Spirit, yes, we are stinky! Yes, we roll with the sheep! Yes, we seek to grow God's flock in the image of Christian perfection, no matter where, no matter when, no matter what we think that we are capable of as human beings, because we are more than human beings, we are children of God through faith in Jesus Christ, the heirs to a royal palace of heavenly goodness and mercy! Let us rejoice, and rejoice loudly, in the stinky humility that grace allows us through God's holy presence on earth, and use that grace to raise up new shepherds to serve our King's sheep fiercely, in the paths of righteousness prepared for us in Christ! Rejoice and be glad! May we stink to high heaven, now and forever! Amen.