

<i>Date Preached</i>	13-Jun-2021	<i>Date Initiated</i>	01-Jun-2021
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Proper 6, Yr B

" [F]or the LORD does not see as mortals see;
they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart. "



A quick poll: How many of you know yourselves to be perfectionists—if not in everything, then at least in *some* things? I know that I am. I place a good bit of value on things' looking and being just right; in rules and practices that are carried out consistently; in doing what has been prescribed, whether by the Prayer Book (in the case of worship planning) or by the assembly instructions that come with a new IKEA bookshelf.

In more introspective moments, I acknowledge being a little obsessive ... and also realize the amount of time this obsession sometimes costs me. I admire (and even envy, a little) people for whom close is good enough; who are content to call it quits when the job is completed—who don't feel compelled to spend additional time sprucing and polishing and flyspecking. As for me? Well, because I couldn't know what a first-rate seminary paper on Martin Luther's theology would say, I spent time making sure my paper was *also* perfectly formatted. Not certain that my cooking will please our dinner guests, I hedge my bets a bit by making sure all the silverware and glasses are perfectly set. The external, superficial things that I *can* control—*can* make perfect—sometimes overshadow and crowd out the internal, fundamental things that, in fact, matter far more.

This tendency of perfectionism to obscure the meaningful core is operating in today's Old Testament lesson, although in order to see it, we have to know the back-story. The Israelites have demanded that God provide them a king, and in Saul, they seem to have gotten one right out of central casting. The Bible tells us Saul is tall—he stands head-and-shoulders above those around him—and the most handsome man in all Israel. He's also charismatic: able to sway people's opinions, garner their loyalty and lead them in battle. And he becomes a mighty warrior, putting down, at last, several of Israel's long-standing enemies and tormentors. On the surface ... by all outward appearances ... Saul is the walking, talking embodiment of the 'perfect' king: the perfect king who will make things perfect for Israel.

But Saul's perfection is only superficial; it masks flaws in his internal fundamentals. Saul is plagued by self-doubt; puffed up by his own position; and prone to disobeying God's explicit instructions. It doesn't take God very long to regret having made 'perfect' Saul a king ... and to decide to anoint David, instead. And what a study in contrasts. David is not the oldest son, but the youngest and least experienced. Not the most gorgeous man in Israel or the tallest, but merely attractive and, still a boy, rather short. Not learned or accomplished (or even trained) in warfare or trade, he is a lowly shepherd.* No, David is just about the farthest thing from anyone's idea of a perfect king ... anyone's, that is, except God's. For God tells Samuel to anoint David right on the

* In fact, David will almost miss his chance to fight Goliath because his father Jesse employs the boy to shuttle bread and cheese to his older brothers and the other soldiers under Saul.

spot; to designate him Saul's successor (and rival), to the amazement and, I'm sure, disbelief of everyone who knows the boy.

For, you see, God ... while perfect ... is *not* a perfectionist! God does not mistake outward appearances for core character; or rely on past glories to discern true potential. In Moses, God chooses a tongue-tied murderer, a fugitive hiding among his father-in-law's sheep, to best Pharaoh and free God's people from bondage. God's concern is for justice, not eloquence or an unblemished record. Despite the badgering and slurs He takes from the religious authorities, Jesus shows little care about the questionable character of the company He keeps. He purposely eats with despised tax collectors and women whom society scorns. He seeks out those most in need of ... and most receptive to ... His message of love and reconciliation.

God focuses on the essentials ... on the things that will effect God's purposes and work God's will ... which means that to us, God's choices often seem unpredictable or unorthodox. God selects the unlikeliest of partners ... supports the least popular causes ... and cares little, if at all, about conventional notions of propriety and order. God's agenda is too important ... too transformative ... to get bogged down in human 'PERFECTS' like decorum and diplomacy and moderation.

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As COVID begins to lift and we begin to re-group as a community ... and my tenure as priest-in-charge runs on toward one-year ... we have entered a season of visioning and experimenting; of discerning and deciding. What is God calling us to be and to do, in this place? at this time? What role should a parish church play in a largely agnostic and excessively individualistic culture? in an outwardly affluent society that tends to mask (or dismiss) the poverty and hunger it doesn't want to confront? How are we to steward all that God has given us in order to serve the divine purposes of justice, dignity and true peace? How are we to share with people the Good News of Jesus Christ without underwhelming them, in our perfect politeness?

The story of Saul's fall and David's anointing tells us to be on guard against the perils of perfectionism. Let us not be so preoccupied with rock-ribbed, traditional notions of what a church 'should' be—in terms of worship, education, outreach, stewardship and so forth—that we miss God's finger pointing to new and liberating ways of doing some of these things. Let us be willing to set aside preconceptions of what it is to 'belong'—attend worship, join a commission, make a pledge and so on—so we can welcome those who find the Christ they're seeking when they volunteer in a soup kitchen; rake leaves; or work to stamp out poverty or racism. Let us consider not just passively welcoming but also actively seeking out and serving those who do not 'fit' our demographic: families with children; young adults; people of color; people in need. Let us, in short, develop a tolerance for things not always being as perfect—as tidy or orderly or predictable—as we're used to, so we can participate in the divine messiness of God's will: that Christ be known in all the world. For *that* will be *true* perfection.



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