

"The Faith Trade."

1 Sam. 15:34-16:13; Ps. 92; 2 Cor. 5:6-17

Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church

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Some of us pride ourselves on being a good judge of people. Some of us seem especially good at getting accurate first impressions of others. I wish I was one of them. But, many times my first impressions turn out not to be accurate. Maybe the same is true with you. Are there times when you have judged someone based on appearances, only to find that things are much more than skin deep?

There are times when those who have gotten off on the wrong foot wind up standing together at the front of the church, making lasting vows to one another.

(I have no evidence to suggest that Albert and Jenni started off like that! But you can probably think of at least one situation in which that was the unfolding scenario. It's been the plot line to more than a few movies and plays.)

When the Prophet Samuel was called by God to anoint a new king to replace Saul, God cautioned Samuel not to be deceived by appearances. King Saul, the first king of Israel, was a big, strong man, but he had turned out to be a disappointment. Whatever he had in strength and inspiring stature was not matched by having a heart for God. Consequently, God had gone looking elsewhere for a king to lead his people.

God said to Samuel, "Humans look on the outward appearance. God looks on the heart." As it was, David was the one chosen by God to replace Saul. David - the runt of the litter - who went on

to be the storied King around whom so much of the Bible and the story of the people of Israel revolves. Looks can be deceiving.

It reminds me of the story about the "vertically challenged" young man who applied for a job as a lumberjack in Alaska. The foreman was dubious, at best, and so to discourage the applicant he gave him a huge ax and put him in front of a massive tree that was hundreds of feet tall and many yards around and told him to chop it down.

Imagine how surprised the foreman was when in no time at all he heard the man yell, "Timber!" Amazed, the foreman asked him where he'd learned his skill at chopping trees.

The man replied: "When I worked in the Sahara Forest." "You mean the Sahara Desert." "That was after I got there," ...  
Appearances can be deceiving.

The Apostle Paul was reported to be a rather small man, balding, with not much of a speaking voice. But his Spirit more than made up for any physical limitations.

His relationship with the church in Corinth was a stormy one, at best. His letters record some of the issues they had to deal with. By the time he is writing here in 2 Corinthians, Chapter 5, Paul is noting the tension between our earthly existence and our heavenly home and hope.

He challenges the Christians at Corinth not to give into the temptation to see things from a worldly point of view but to see things instead from a spiritual point of view.

Christ's death and resurrection has turned everything upside down. Things are no longer what they seem. As members of Christ's body, the Church, the Corinthians and everyone who calls themselves a follower of Christ must see things in light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Things are not what they seem. Even the way that Jesus was once regarded from a human point of view has changed.

We are called to exchange our old way of seeing for a new way. It is a way that leads us to believe the best and not the worst of others, to resist the urge to gossip, to trust that God is in charge and know that we need not be overly concerned with "getting what's ours" here and now.

Seeing things with the eyes of faith, trading new eyes for old, is a vital part of the ministry of reconciliation to which we are called.

During the Renaissance there was a poor French scholar who was known by the Latin name Muretus. He became ill while in an Italian town and was taken to a hospital for strays and helpless creatures. The doctors discussed his case in Latin - a mark of learned people in those times - never thinking that this non-descript beggar would understand. One of them suggested that since he was only a worthless wanderer, they might as well use him for medical experiments. Muretus looked up and answered in perfect Latin: "Call no man worthless for whom Christ died."

It seems Muretus is on the short list of those who were considered the finest Latin scholars of his day.

The process of seeing others from a new perspective, from a faith perspective, of trading an old way of seeing for a new one is all about "trading up"! Christ came down, lived and died and rose again so that our sights might rise with him and we might see things differently in the world around us.

Notice St. Paul's words in verse 16: "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way." Back when Paul the Apostle had been Saul of Tarsus, he had regarded Jesus as a blaspheming pretender who deserved to die. But when Jesus confronted Paul one day on the road to Damascus, Paul's view of Jesus changed. Paul's primary mission in life became to tell the story of Jesus.

When Jesus Christ reconciles us to God, he gives us new eyes with which to see others. We no longer focus on the size of their bank accounts, the color of their skin, the slant of their politics, or the refinement of their personalities. Our vision is dominated by the fact that all persons are made in the image of God, and are designed to be our sisters and brothers.

As Christians we are involved in the "faith trade". As Christians we practice trading new eyes for old, new hearts for old, new hope and a new future for a life that we thought was a closed book.

And the Good News is that we don't have to wait to be struck blind on a Damascus Road for this "faith trade." We don't have to give in to thinking the worst about others or ourselves. We don't have to live enslaved to the past.

It can happen today. St. Paul writes, "If anyone is in Christ he (or she) is a new creation...."

So, if you are dissatisfied with your life in any way, hear this word of hope. Christ offers you the opportunity to make a new beginning! Here and now.

After he had finished a series of tent revival meetings the well-known evangelist Billy Sunday was helping the workmen take down the tent. A young man who had been in the meeting the night before came up to Mr. Sunday and asked him earnestly, "What must I do to be saved?"

Sunday said, "You're too late," and kept on working.

"Don't say that," exclaimed the young man, "for I desire salvation. I would do anything or go anywhere to obtain it."

"I can't help it," Sunday replied. "You're too late; for your salvation was completed many years ago by Jesus Christ, and it's a finished work. All you can do is simply accept it. You have done nothing to earn it and you can do nothing to earn it. It is free to all who will receive it."

New life in Christ begins with a recognition of who we are and what our situation is. We are cut off from God. We are helpless to fill the emptiness we sense in our souls. All we can do is to receive that which God freely gives: His grace. When we do that, it becomes possible for us to become a new person in Christ.

But there is a final step. We do not truly become new persons in Christ until we, ourselves, become ambassadors of reconciliation.

St. Paul says, "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation...."

This, in fact, is the test of whether our experience of Christ is real: Does it drive us farther from others or closer to them? Some people have what they call a "conversion experience", but it causes them to look down on others or to avoid others, or even to despise them.

If our experience of Christ is real, exactly the opposite will occur. St. Paul says, "...from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer." When we become a new person in Christ, we see others in a new way. We see them as persons to whom God is reaching out as He once reached out to us.

This time, however, God is reaching out through us and God can use us because we have traded..."UP".

Thanks be to God! Amen.