

June 24, 2018

I Samuel 16: 1-13

Prayer: Dear Lord, As we worship in freedom and safety this morning, we pray for those families on our border, seeking asylum, seeking safety, seeking a better way of life. We pray that you illumine your Word that we might understand it and apply it in all these difficult real-life situations that we face and that our country faces. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

The Little Team That Could

Both of my daughters, Dustin and Madison, played soccer. With fall and spring seasons, that worked out to about 38 seasons of soccer to watch – in drenching rain, searing heat, even snow.

But the one game I will never forget occurred when Madison was 7 years old.

She was playing for a team called the Raptors, and their uniforms were bright red. Bright red jerseys, shiny red shorts, red socks and shinguards, black soccer cleats.

This particular Saturday morning, they were supposed to be playing at a field in Simpsonville but the other team didn't show up. We waited and we waited, figuring we'd get a forfeit.

Then at the last minute, a van pulled up. A white teen-ager and five little African-American girls in T-shirts, blue jeans and tennis shoes hopped out.

Well, this teen-ager was apparently the coach, and as we watched, she placed a tiny 5-year-old girl in the goal. Her team had only five players when you needed seven for a team in the Under-8 division.

Not surprisingly, Madison's Raptors scored goal after goal. One of the girls in jeans and tennis shoes lay down in the middle of the field. The Raptors looked around, not sure what they were supposed to do.

Before long, the score was 14-0 which was no fun for anyone.

But I was absolutely intrigued. Who were these people? What would make them put themselves through this punishment?

When the game was over, I approached a gentleman with the other team and introduced myself. His name was Hiram Springle, and he told me he had founded a soccer league in the inner city. He had seven boys' teams but this was the only girls' team.

The teen-age coach was a student at Christ Church Episcopal School. She was coaching this girls' team as her senior project.

They were underdogs in every way. This teen-age girl coaching against suburban dads. These inner-city 5-, 6- and 7-year-olds who had clearly not seen a soccer ball until very recently. I thought it looked like a promising feature story for *The Greenville News*.

So I spent the rest of that season out behind what was then Jesse Jackson Townhomes with the Wild Tigers, two practices a week, games on Saturdays. I spent hours with the 17-year-old coach who gave up her job at Baskin Robbins to coach the team, who paid for their

snacks out of her babysitting money. Her name was Shannon, and she was a star player for Christ Church.

Now this was 1997, and you have to realize where soccer was in Greenville. It had been in the suburbs for 20 years by then. It had *not* made its way to the inner city.

The girls on the Wild Tigers' team mostly lived in Jesse Jackson. They knew basketball. But they'd never seen a soccer ball in their lives. And it showed.

Game 1: The goalie got her head stuck in the net.

On the next play, Shannon turned around and found the goalie standing beside her on the sideline. "Coach Shannon, I'm tired of playing today," she said. "I'll play again tomorrow."

Game 2: That was the game against Madison's Raptors that ended 14-0 before Madison's coach sent some of his girls over to even up the teams and scrimmage.

Game 3: The Wild Tigers got snazzy new black and white uniforms, shinguards, cleats. No more jeans and T-shirts.

They also got some 8-year-olds to join the team. They wouldn't be the youngest, smallest team on the field anymore.

They lost Game 3 only 4-3.

Games 4 and 5: As the Wild Tigers added older players, they got better. But they also began to squabble and fight among themselves.

Shannon spent a lot of time at the practices refereeing fights, teaching teamwork, teaching respect.

The girls' parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles started coming to watch their games. Still, the Tigers lost games 4 and 5.

Game 6: The next-to-last game of the season dawned drizzly and cold. Several of the girls were sick, so the Wild Tigers had only six players. No one scored during the first half.

But at half-time, something happened. Something clicked. If it had been a movie, it would have involved an inspirational speech by Coach Shannon. But I suspect it had more to do with the fact that Latoya's father offered her \$10 for a goal.

When the Wild Tigers came out during the second half, they scored – bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, bam. Six goals.

An inner-city team that wasn't supposed to know the game of soccer won a game.

Reporters don't usually write their headlines. But this time I did. In fact, I wrote the headline before I wrote the story. I called it "The little team that could."

It was a story about a team of inner-city underdogs who managed to do what they weren't supposed to do: Win at a suburban sport against teams who had played for years.

Underdogs make great stories. Rudy. Sea Biscuit. The 1980 men's ice hockey team.

We love stories about people – or horses -- who start out at a disadvantage and defy all the odds to become winners.

But Americans didn't invent the underdog story. Ancient cultures had their underdog tales, too.

Today's Scripture passage is the beginning of a great epic starring an underdog named David. That's David as in David and Goliath, perhaps the greatest underdog story of all time.

Last week, we talked about Israel begging for a king. They wanted to be like all the nations around them. The Lord, through Samuel, tried to convince them otherwise. But he ultimately allowed the people their choice, and they got King Saul.

King Saul was a great warrior and reigned for awhile. But by the time we get to today's story, Saul has fallen out of favor and Samuel has turned his back on him. Please turn with me in your Bibles to **I Samuel 16: 1-13**, and let's read about the underdog who would become Israel's next king.

The LORD said to Samuel, 'How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.'

²Samuel said, 'How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.' And the LORD said, 'Take a heifer with you, and say, "I have come to sacrifice to the LORD." ³Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.'

⁴Samuel did what the LORD commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, 'Do you come peaceably?' ⁵He said, 'Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.' And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

6 When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, 'Surely the LORD's anointed is now before the LORD.' ⁷But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.'

⁸Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, 'Neither has the LORD chosen this one.' ⁹Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, 'Neither has the LORD chosen this one.'

¹⁰Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, 'The LORD has not chosen any of these.'

¹¹Samuel said to Jesse, 'Are all your sons here?' And he said, 'There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.' And Samuel said to Jesse, 'Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.'

¹²He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The LORD said, 'Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.' ¹³Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward.

David was Jesse's youngest son, the one his father didn't even think to introduce to Samuel. Old Testament scholars estimate that David was about 12 years old when this story occurred.

That explains a lot, doesn't it? No wonder Jesse didn't think to bring him before Samuel.

Few of us can see a person's adult potential in a 12-year-old. But God can.

Several of our partner churches bring their confirmand classes to visit us. These are 12- and 13-year-olds who are learning the tenets of their Christian and denominational faith.

Denominations do this at 12 and 13 because, developmentally, it is an age that we consider pivotal. It is an age where a person moves from adolescence to teen-hood, from childhood to the earliest beginnings of adulthood.

It is the year for most coming-of-age novels.

And yet, in our eyes, a 12-year-old being asked to go ahead of seven older brothers is not ready. He is not an option.

Even Samuel, among the wisest of the prophets, looked at Jesse's oldest son, Eliab, and thought, *This is him. This has got to be him.*

Not so. The Lord warned Samuel not to look at appearance or stature. **“For the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”**

A heart has no age. A heart has no appearance. A heart has no height.

How does the Lord look upon us?

What does he see when he looks on our hearts?

The Bible is full of stories about the Lord choosing unlikely candidates to do his work.

Jacob was a trickster who stole his brother's birthright. Yet God called him to father the 12 tribes of Israel.

Moses was a murderer who could not speak eloquently. Yet God called him to raise a vocal protest to the pharaoh of Egypt.

Paul was a Pharisee who persecuted Christians. Yet God called him to preach the Christian gospel.

God sees things in us that we cannot always see in ourselves. God can look into the heart of a 12-year-old and see the great things she is capable of.

God can look into the heart of the addict and see a sober man fighting to get out.

God can look into the heart of the abused and see a strong woman deserving a better life.

You have heard me talk about Triune's involvement with the Greenville Homeless Alliance. That's an alliance that started with many of our homeless service partners to address Greenville's affordable housing crisis.

Well, the man Miracle Hill sent to be part of our steering committee was a clean-cut young man named Ryan Duerk. He was smart and capable and actually wrote our bylaws.

And one day someone said to me, "You know he came up through Overcomers, don't you?"

I had no idea. And so I went off in search of Ryan's underdog story.

Ryan's parents divorced when he was in third grade. When he was in fifth grade, his mother had a series of heart attacks that resulted in brain injury. He had to move into a chaotic household with his father, stepmother, brothers and step-siblings.

Very soon afterward, he began experimenting with alcohol, then marijuana, then harder drugs.

He dropped out of high school. His father kicked him out of the house. The next few years were a blur of drinking and using, couch surfing and jail cells and suicide attempts.

Then his mother, who'd been institutionalized, died. "As I sat by her death bed and watched her move away from this life," he said, "I was strung out on dope, broke, hopeless, and certainly not very sane."

His brothers urged him to go into rehab. It took some more using and some more jail time, but he eventually made his way to Miracle Hill and the Overcomers' program. He accepted Christ while there, but graduated and relapsed.

In 2007, he returned to Overcomers and agreed to do 100% of what they asked him to do. It was much harder the second time around, he says.

When he graduated, he went to work in the food warehouse right over here on Pete Hollis Boulevard. It was a job he felt was beneath him. But this time around, he trusted that the Miracle Hill people probably knew him better than he knew himself.

He worked his way up to Overcomer counselor, then program manager, then director of Overcomers. Now he is vice president of adult ministries, which is right up there near the top of Miracle Hill's executive team. He returned to school and got his bachelor's degree in psychology, then an MBA. He married and has two children.

Ryan will gladly tell you there is no one in Overcomers, there is no one at Triune, who messed up worse than he did. Yet like King David, like Jacob, like Moses, like Paul, the messes are often whom God chooses.

Do not let school or society or even the church define who you are. You are precious children of God, and only God has the right to define you.

Even Samuel, the mighty prophet Samuel, got it wrong. He wanted to choose Jesse's oldest son, and if not him, then sons two through seven.

No, said God. You're not looking in the right place. You gotta look in his heart.

And Jesse brought in the shepherd boy, the one his own family didn't think was a possibility. And the Lord said, **"This is the one."**

This is the one.

Last month I received a card from a 9-year-old girl in Travelers Rest. Three dollars were tucked inside.

"Dear Triune Mercy Center," read the card. "My name is Olivia and I want to donate this money. Me and my sister have wanted to donate it so you use it to help others. The two dollars came from me, and the other dollar came from my papa. I hope the people at the soup kitchen get enough to eat. Love, Olivia."

A heart has no age. A heart has no appearance. A heart has no height.

The one God chooses today may be a young confirmand or an abused woman or an addicted man or a child on our Southern border.

I urge you to open yourself to the possibilities of God's anointing hand.

He's looking for things we cannot see.

Amen.