

Mary Page attended seminary at Candler School of theology which is a part of Emory University in Atlanta. And while there, her ministry placement was as a chaplain at a Women's Prison. Now, Candler had a long standing relationship with this particular prison where their professors taught classes in the prison. They even helped start a choir made up of incarcerated women. This choir, with their armed guard, came to Candler to present a concert.

And there was one member of the choir who sang a solo that was amazing. I mean, it blew Mary Page away. So after the concert, Mary Page went up to the women to congratulate them on a magnificent performance. As a chaplain, she knew all of them, all of them, except the woman who had sung the amazing solo. So Mary Page introduced herself and said, "Wow! You are so talented. I mean you could be a professional singer."

The woman kind of gave Mary Page a strange look but Mary Page didn't think too much about it ...until the next week's Emory newsletter came out with the headline, "Emily Saliers of the Indigo Girls Sings with Prison Choir."

You see, Emily Salier's dad is a theology professor at Candler and has worked with the prison theology program and he had gotten Emily Saliers to work with the choir. Now Mary Page was a huge Indigo Girls fan but had never seen a picture of Emily Saliers and, at that point, never seen the Indigo Girls in concert. So it makes sense that she would think this iconic singer was simply an undiscovered talent who had the misfortune of being in prison.

Our Scripture today is, in part, about the assumptions we make about people. Samuel needs to anoint a new king for Israel but the person God has chosen ends up being not who Samuel expected.

But first, a little background.

Last week, we talked about how the Israelites were called to be different. For the first several hundred years of their existence as a nation, they didn't have a king. A king would oppress them. A king would claim absolute power. A king would be tempted to think he was God. A king was too close to what Pharaoh was in Egypt. But the people gave into the temptation to be like other nations and they demanded a king. So God said to Samuel, "Ok. Give them a king."

Let me pause here to point out something that I think is really interesting. God told the people that having a king is a bad idea. God told them that having a king is like they were rejecting God. But when the people decided to have a king anyway, God said, "ok." God gave the people freedom to choose their path, and, even more remarkable, God tried to steer the king to do good by the people. Even when we don't follow the path God has for us, it seems like God still tries to work through the path that we've chosen for ourselves, even if God knows it's a bad idea.

A number of years ago, there was a 23 year old young man who was part of an internship I was directing. Now, his dad wanted him in the program because he was having trouble making the transition to adulthood. You see, what he wanted to do for a career was be a youtuber...that is make videos for youtube that go viral and get sponsors to pay him money for making videos. Now if that doesn't sound like a gainful way of making a living, it's not. And the dad knew that.

But there came a point where the dad realized that the kid was going to try to be a youtuber, not just as a hobby but as a career, with or without his support so he did everything he could to support him, even though he knew it was a bad idea.

That's kind of how God is. God is like the dad saying, "Being a youtube is a really bad idea, but if that's what you want to do, I'll be with you. Wanting a king is a really bad idea, but if that's what you want to do, I'll be with you."

Ok, now back to our story. Oh, wait, just in case your curious, the dad was right, being a youtuber didn't work out for the young man.

Ok, now back to our story.

Israel's first king was Saul. And he was about what you'd expect. He was wealthy and came from a wealthy family. He was tall and strong and handsome. In fact the Scripture says, "There was not a man among the Israelites more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else."

But he turned out not to be the king that Israel needed. Samuel's warnings about a king proved prophetic. Saul claimed authority that was not his...specifically to fulfill the role designated to the priest. It's a dangerous thing when a political leader claims religious authority—it was then and it is now.

So God told Samuel to anoint a new king and that he should go the home of Jesse and one of Jesse's sons would be the king that Israel needed. Now, it would be years before this new king would assume the throne. But Samuel was old and about to die, so he needed to anoint the king in advance.

Jesse was prepared. He had all of his sons there, ready for Samuel to inspect them. The firstborn son, Eliab, was the obvious choice. Like Saul, he was tall, strong, handsome. He could easily play the part of a leader that would instill confidence. But God had other ideas. God 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."

God was not going to pick the obvious candidate this time around. One by one, Jesse's sons passed before Samuel, but none of them had been chosen to be king. Finally, Samuel asked if there were any more of Jesse's kids and there was the youngest child, David. In fact, his family was so certain that he wasn't the one chosen, they didn't even bother to call him in from the field.

But he was the one Samuel had come to anoint. In a world where the firstborn was privileged and powerful, God chose the youngest. In a world that privileged the outward appearance, God chose the one you'd least expect.

Now let me pause for a minute and say that there is an awful lot that is problematic about this story. In addition to trying to assume the role of priest, another reason Saul was rejected was because he didn't slaughter all of his enemies. The story of King David will have horrific moments of murder and adultery. While those acts were condemned by God, David also destroyed entire villages, seemingly at God's command.

Violence in the Bible is a real problem and one that I'll probably address in another sermon at some point. But for now, let me just acknowledge the very real problems in this story and to say that just because the Biblical writers claim something as God's will doesn't mean it is. God is not for violence. God is not for slaughter. God is not for elevating one group of people over another.

But in spite of all of the problems with this story in our Scripture, I think this one core insight – that God does not see as humans see – is so profoundly important.

Throughout Scripture, God rarely calls the person we'd expect. Or maybe to say it another way, God sees the gifts and strengths in people that are so often overlooked or ignored because they don't appear like we expect people who have those gifts to appear. Over and over again, God's story surprises us with the people that God can use. And so often, it seems that God chooses people that we humans are tempted to dismiss or underestimate or even condemn. And so maybe we should be careful about making decisions about who someone is by what we assume about them based on what they look like, or the job they have, or the language or accent they speak with, or how they identify, or the company they keep, or the political signs in their yards, or any number of other things.

And here's the thing, it is so easy to make assumptions about who someone is without really knowing them just by going through the course of daily life. A number of years ago, the Washington Post wanted to conduct a social experiment of sorts about this very thing. They arranged for world class violinist, Joshua Bell, someone who sells out symphony halls the world over, to play in an arcade right outside a DC metro station. In the time he played, 1097 people passed, unaware that they were listening for free to perhaps the greatest violin player on the planet playing music that people would pay hundreds of dollars to hear. Of the 1097 people, only 7 stopped to listen for any extended period of time.

Now my guess is there were probably more than 7 people out of that number that have an ear for great music. But they weren't expecting to hear great music. They were expecting to hear just another street performer. And so by seeing only what they expected to see, they missed out on what could have been a great experience.

And that brings me back to the story of Mary Page and Emily Saliers of the Indigo Girls. We like this story in our family. Mary Page tells this story to laugh at herself. I tell it sometimes to poke a little fun at her. But I think what the story actually says about Mary Page is something that I absolutely love about her. She didn't do what the people who passed Joshua Bell by did. She paid attention. She recognized beauty when she heard it. And, most importantly, she didn't dismiss someone who she thought to be a prison inmate as someone who couldn't offer the world something profoundly beautiful. She didn't need to know that the woman was Emily Saliers to

know that she had a profound gift to offer the world because she believed that a woman in prison was able to offer the world a profound gift.

Friends, that's the invitation for all of us. To never discredit or discount or dismiss someone because of the assumptions we might make about them. But instead, to stop, to pay attention, to listen, and to trust that whatever assumptions we might make about a person, they are first and foremost a child of God, and that means they have something unbelievable to offer the world, if only we have the eyes to see it.