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A New Way of Seeing

1 Samuel 16:7a

The congregation which began worshiping in this space in 1908 was living in a time of change. The world was being transformed in ways no one could predict or fully understand. When this church was designed the age of the automobile had not yet begun. Parking spaces for cars were not part of the plan for this building. When Henry Ford introduced the Model T in 1908 the automobile was seen as the plaything of the rich. Cars carried very hefty price tags of \$2,000 to \$4,000 which put them well out of reach for most people. Many thought the new horseless carriage was a sign of the decadence of the rich. This resentment of wealthy automobile owners was echoed by Woodrow Wilson who was President of Princeton University in 1906. He wrote that year that, "Nothing has spread socialistic feeling in this country more than the use of the automobile, a picture of the arrogance of wealth."¹

Henry Ford's Model T was the product of a very different vision. It was not designed for the rich. Ford wanted to produce a car that would be accessible to ordinary people. His introductory price of \$850 was significantly lower than anyone thought possible. Ford found a way to produce a simpler piece of machinery and then pursued a mass market. One writer has described Ford's achievement in these words:

Ford manufactured just 309 Model T's in 1908. But his new automobile was destined to be one of the most successful ever made. By 1916 Ford would be making almost 600,000 cars a year and could lower the price of the Model T to \$360, which produced more demand, to which Ford responded with more supply. Henry Ford was superb at anticipating the future, but not even he could have predicted the popularity of the Model T and the effects it would have...on nearly every aspect of American life.²

Henry Ford could see something that no other businessman of his time could see. He saw that the lives of ordinary people can be transformed.

When the prophet Samuel arrived in the town of Bethlehem he understood that change was in the air. The reign of King Saul was nearing an end. Saul was seriously flawed as a leader and his administration was in collapse. Against his better judgment Samuel is maneuvered by the Lord into the dangerous task of identifying a new leader. The danger of this mission is not the only reason for Samuel's reluctance. Samuel led the search committee to find Saul. Saul's failure means that Samuel no longer trusts his own ability to judge the character of a potential leader. Certainly the small town of Bethlehem is the last place he would expect to find the next leader of his people. But this is where God has told him to go and Samuel complies.

Samuel follows his instructions to seek a new king among the sons of a man named Jesse. He immediately notices the leadership potential of Jesse's oldest son Eliab. Eliab is tall and handsome. He has obviously been working out at the local health club. He looks like a leader and he handles himself like a leader. The prophet is ready to hire him on the spot. Nine out of ten search committees would choose Eliab. As the eldest son he has been groomed for leadership. But the Lord rejects the obvious choice.

In the end the Lord chooses the youngest son who is the least experienced and clearly not qualified for the position. It is the choice that almost no search committee would make. He is certainly not the one Samuel would have chosen. David is a nice looking but ordinary youth from an insignificant family of the smallest and most isolated tribe of Israel. In affirming this choice Samuel is invited to experience a new way of seeing. The scripture writer tells us that “the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart (1 Samuel 16:7a).” God sees that ordinary people like David can serve in extraordinary ways.

This new way of seeing is explored by the gospel writer in the ninth chapter of John’s gospel. There we find a message of hope directed to a people who have been cut off from the institutions that have nourished their faith. Early Christians were being expelled from their synagogues. Their faith in Christ had made them exiles. They were confronted with a degree of change that went far beyond anything they could have anticipated.

John tells his readers of a man who Jesus led into a new way of seeing. He was blind from birth and Jesus restored his sight. But the gift of sight created a new set of problems for this man. Others could not accept the reality of his wholeness and he was expelled from the synagogue. Jesus learns of the man’s misfortune and seeks him out. Jesus then invites him to profess his faith. Without hesitation the man does exactly that. John wants his readers to understand that the greatest miracle is not the restoration of physical sight, but the opening of this man’s spiritual eyes to see that he can serve God in ways he never dreamed possible. John is calling his people to a new way of seeing who they are and the extraordinary service they can offer to God and others.

The leaders of Westminster embraced this new way of seeing as they made the transition to Walnut and Edwards. They understood that the church faced the challenge of seeing its ministry and mission in a different way. It had been two and a half years since they had said goodbye to the old Second Presbyterian Church downtown. They held afternoon services in two different churches during that time of exile. As they moved into this building they tried to use God’s eyes to see what it would mean to serve God in this place. The result of that effort was a mission statement written in the distinctive flowing prose of their new pastor, Adelbert P. Higley. These words will sound familiar to many of you because they form the basis of the mission statement we use today.

The Second Presbyterian Church believes that it is in the world for ministry. For nearly three-quarters of a century, as a downtown church, it has been a center of moral and religious power. With positive convictions and broad sympathies it has met and solved many problems incident to its environment and in many ways has influenced the life of our city. A change of location will necessitate a change of method. Around this church is a large parish demanding varied and important service. To train the children, to lead and inspire the young people, to quicken the moral impulse, to comfort the sorrowing and to win people by the charm and strength of Jesus Christ as He is manifested in the words and works of this society will be the aim of the church. To accomplish this, the active and faithful co-operation of every member will be necessary. Let the door of this church be a way to service.³

For more than one hundred years these words have inspired the ordinary people who worship here to serve in extraordinary ways.

Endnotes

1. Woodrow Wilson quoted by Jim Rosenberger in *Smithsonian*, January 2008, page 49.
2. Jim Rosenberger in *Smithsonian*, January 2008, page 49.
3. Worship bulletin for the Service of Dedication for Westminster's 1908 building.