

***Beneath the Surface* – 1 Samuel 15:34-16:13**

Rev. Matt Nieman

June 16, 2024

So, you've heard of this drug called Ozempic. It's pretty popular these days. Traditionally a drug to treat diabetes, it's also been known to cause people to lose weight. And now, many people are taking it for the sole purpose of losing weight.

Most of us are trying to lose weight—for our health and sometimes to just make us look better. Ozempic seems to now be that wonder drug.

For people who are starting to lose their hair, there are impressive medications that can perhaps stem the tide of hair loss and even grow hair back. For some of us, that ship sailed long ago. For others, especially men, there's still hope that the receding can be halted.

There are no negative health effects of losing one's hair. However, if it's not too late, efforts to stop the loss can help with one's self-image and self-confidence.

While some of us are concerned with our body image, others express themselves by what they wear. And we make impressions by what we wear and form impressions of others by what they wear.

For example, I know that whenever I see someone with an Iowa Hawkeye jersey on, it conjures in me bad thoughts. I get a negative impression of that person, questioning their good judgment: "Why would someone wear something so ugly?" That's bad form on my part, judging their appearance. But I can't help it! Why would somebody defame themselves in such a way by wearing Hawkeye gear?!

On a serious note, we do judge people based on their appearances more than we care to admit. We judge people on their shape, their color, their dress, and their exterior beauty too often. Is it a vanity thing? Is it just what the culture mandates? Is it personal? Is it about jealousy and wishing we had what he or she had?

Regardless of the reasoning, we don't look often enough beyond the surface. We don't examine what a person's heart looks like instead of what's on the outside.

And what we find on the inside is always what's important.

God said to Samuel, when the topic of who the next king would be, "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."

And that set the stage for the choosing of David to be Israel's new king. While David turned out to be a good-looking young man, it was his heart that pleased God. That's what really got God's attention.

As we get older, the outward things don't seem to be as important to us. It's the inward things that should make us sit up and take notice of a person. What attracts us to that person, rather than repels us? What makes us want to be inside their realm rather than outside it?

There are several qualities, but three today stand out: a willingness to listen, a commitment to serving, and a wise demeanor.

A middle-aged guy once confided in a friend, "I find it extremely difficult to talk with my father, and it saddens me because I want to get closer to him."

"I didn't realize it was so hard for you to be together," said the friend.

"We don't argue or anything," he said. "We just care about such different things. When he starts to talk about golf, I want to scream. I have no interest in golf whatsoever."

"Then it's simple," I said. "You don't need to have any interest in golf. What you're interested in is your father. Just listen to him and not to the golf." --Meditation consultant Eknath Easwaran, *Take Your Time: Finding Balance in a Hurried World* (Tomales, Calif.: Nilgiri Press, 1991), 119-120.

Today is my first Fathers' Day without my dad, who died last October. And one of the things my dad was really good at was listening. He liked to talk at times, and he had some strong opinions. But he took interest in other people and showed it through his ability to be quiet many times.

And I really appreciated how good of a listener he was when he wasn't a good listener anymore due to his dementia over the last couple years of his life. That's when I knew I was gradually losing my dad. He

had less and less interest in hearing of the lives of others anymore. And I knew it was the illness that was causing it.

To be a good listener when you're healthy and when you're getting older is a special, special gift we can give to those around us. Others will come to appreciate our listening ears that come with lifetimes of experiencing the ups and downs we've all had.

And it's not just about listening to others. It's also about listening for the voice of God. And that requires blocking out all the noise at times.

Tish Harrison Warren, writing in the *New York Times* in January, 2022, found a way to open herself up to the voices around her.

"The times when I checked Twitter were often the transition points in my day: when I sat down to work or I finished a task, waiting at a light or in line or to pick up my kids from school, going to the bathroom, the few minutes before I fell asleep. Freeing up those small, seemingly inconsequential moments has been transformative. These moments of quiet and emptiness throughout the day are nothing I really considered before. I don't schedule them in my calendar, and I didn't notice their departure when I began going online. But leaving these small moments of my day unfilled changed how I walk through time.

My new motto born of this experience is: Guard the margins — those seemingly unimportant parts of our day and time. Margins on a page can seem like wasted space, but all that blank space helps us to read and take in information. We need the blank spaces. We need moments when we get no input, no news, no videos, no memes, no opinions. We need moments when we space out, daydream, when our minds go blank.

Listening, a sign of a beautiful heart, is a way to honor the small breaks in our lives and potentially hear God's voice.

Secondly, a beautiful heart is also made by our commitment to serve each other.

When we think of serving in the context of faith and church, our first thoughts are things like mission trips, volunteering at the food pantry, serving lunch to the homeless, or making bags of goodies for the less fortunate. This is the epitome of serving others.

Some people take service to the extreme, doing incredible and very risky things for others.

For example, a man arrived at the gates of heaven one day, and St. Peter looked up his record and said, "Well, you didn't do anything particularly good, but neither did you do anything particularly bad. I'll tell you what: If you can tell me of one really good deed you've done, I'll let you stay."

So the man said, "Well, once I saw some bikers menacing a young woman. I stopped my car. I took out my tire iron. I walked up to their leader, a huge, hairy, ugly guy. He had a nose ring. I ripped it right out of his nose, and I said, 'You leave this girl alone, you hear?' I stared at all of them, and I said, 'Now get out of here, or you'll have to answer to me.'"

St. Peter was impressed.

"When did this happen?" he asked the man.

"About two minutes ago."

Extreme acts of service can have fatal consequences.

However, service can be much less risky, more personal, and just as important: steady and unwavering commitment to a spouse, caring for an older parent, being present and providing for your young children in the wake of great financial hardship, praying for a child in the church, or regularly looking in on a neighbor next door.

Service is an attitude—an attitude of committing one's attention to somebody else as much as, if not more so, than to oneself.

As Alexander Irvine once wrote, "God takes a hand whenever he can find it and just does what he likes with it. But they're all hands touched by his Spirit, and his Spirit's everywhere lookin' for hands to use."

Our hands of service also reflect a beautiful heart.

And finally, the third quality that attracts us to others is one's wise demeanor. As much as someone listens to us, and as much as they serve us, we want to glean just a part of the wisdom they have to share.

We're attracted to their wisdom. And this wisdom is not merely reflected in the knowledge they have, the facts they spew. It's apparent in the ways they take the laws of nature and of life and apply it to their lives

in ways that help us avoid the pitfalls that would otherwise claim us and derail us.

I didn't need to learn facts from my grandparents, but in being with them I learned how they operated, how they worked, what they prioritized, and how those priorities turned into their success.

When it comes to faith, there's a great need to share the stories that illustrate faith—stories reflected in the Bible. But what's even more needed are examples of people who live out the Biblical stories in ways that help us adapt those ways of living into our own lives: how they treat people, how they stand up for what's right, how they give of and sacrifice what they have.

This is wisdom that has lasting effects on our world. This is wisdom that you can't necessarily see on the surface of another. But it's there, and it's beautiful.

Wisdom, along with a willingness to listen and to serve, signals a beautiful heart.

The boy David who would become King David was not a perfect person. He would go on to make great mistakes as a leader. But God saw something under the surface of his outward appearance and deemed him ready to lead. He had beautiful eyes and was handsome according to the text. But that's not what God saw. He saw his heart.

When we look in the mirror, we don't see the same person we saw decades ago. And most of us regret that. And yet, the effects of aging don't have to dim the beauty of our hearts. It's what God really looks at, and it's what others look at too.