

Here's Mud in Your Eyes

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr.
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Well how about those VCU Rams?!? Yes I know they lost, but I have nothing but pride for my hometown of Richmond, VA and their performance in this year's NCAA basketball tournament. And VCU's run was incredible in the truest sense of that word; it was beyond credibility. VCU has a point guard who wouldn't hit 6 foot even if he stood on a phone book or two. They have a 34 year old coach with the worst case of ADHD I've ever seen. They do not play in a major conference like the Big 12, the Big East or the ACC. Outside of Richmond, VA, most people were indignant that VCU was even invited to the big dance. And yet they came within 2 minutes of making the finals. VCU challenged all of our assumptions about who should and should not be invited.

Now switching from basketball to Bible, a long time ago Samuel chaired the committee to find a new king. He shows up at Jesse's house who parades his sons in front of him. So Samuel's looking at Jesse's sons: Good height, nice jaw line, excellent posture, nice tan, good build. Yep, he's the one. But God said, "I don't think so." Samuel says in response, "Look Lord, the marketing group has determined this is the look people are looking for; he just looks kingly. This will sell." But God says, "I know. You look at marketability while I look at the heart and soul; keep looking." So Samuel shrugs and asks Jesse if there is anybody else he might consider, because God's chosen isn't here. Jesse remembers as an afterthought that there is David, and folks, despite what the Book of Samuel says, if David had been so handsome and good looking, he wouldn't have been out in the wilderness with the animals away from public eye.

So would you want David for your King? Probably not. For that matter, would you want David for your pastor? Good heavens, no. You'd kick the search committee out on the street if they came back to you with David's name.

Now while a search committee has not yet been formed, the Church and Ministry Committee has been trying to do some ground work for you. So at this time I'd like to ask Dale Bennet if he'd come up and give a report from Church and Ministry regarding the work they've already done in searching for a new pastor.

A Report from Church and Ministry

As you are aware, we have found ourselves in an interim period. While a formal search committee has not yet been formed, the Church and Ministry committee have investigated some possible pastoral candidates. However, of the names we have investigated, only one was found to have the necessary qualities to be our pastor. The following list contains the names of the candidates and comments on each should the church and/or the search committee wish to investigate them further for future pastoral replacements.

Moses: A very poor speaker. Not only does he stutter, but his former congregation said he could lose his temper over trivial things. In addition, and far more serious to us, we discovered that he was tried in absentia in another country on charges of murder.

Abraham: While there's some real potential here for leadership, his life seems to be based on a soap opera. He had a child by one of his servants and there was another story that we found difficult to follow. On at least two occasions he gave his wife to another man saying she was his sister. Very odd.

Deborah: Successfully commanded a Hebrew army and has served as a judge, but simply put, she's a she.

David: Once again the potential for pastoral leadership is high. But his moral character is unacceptable. Not only is his family in disarray, but he had another man killed so he could marry his wife.

Solomon: He has a reputation for wisdom, but fails to practice what he preaches. Furthermore he is a polygamist and we doubt we can afford to provide him with a salary that can support all his wives, much less his mistresses.

Hosea: Here is another "Man of God" whose family life is in shambles. Not only is he divorced, but he went and remarried his ex-wife who remains to this day a prostitute.

Amos: This individual comes from a farming background and would probably be better off had he kept to picking figs. He is VERY class conscious and quite disrespectful of people in power. We found him to be very unpatriotic.

Ezekiel: His clergy psychiatric profile is full of documented evidence of psychotic and neurotic pathologies. Our insurance company has told us that they will drop our coverage if he is hired.

John: He says he is a Baptist, but he lacks tact and he dresses like a hippie. The interview ended when he called the consistory a brood of vipers. He also has been known to bring a honey-glazed grasshopper dish to church pot lucks.

Peter: He's impulsive and has a short fuse. We've found evidence that he has denied his faith publicly on multiple occasions. But even if he has changed, we are unsure as to whether this blue-collar fisherman would fit in well with the socio-demographics of our congregation.

Paul: How can we put this delicately? Well... he lacks tact, his appearance is contemptible, he preaches far too long and he might be the most arrogant of all the candidates we have investigated.

Timothy: While he too has a lot of potential, he is far too young and unseasoned for the position.

Jesus: He has been known to offend church members with his preaching. He once had quite a following but managed to chase away most of them. He is far too controversial for our tastes.

Judas: Last, but certainly not least, there's Judas. He seemed to be very practical, co-operative and good with money. He says he cares for the poor and he dresses quite well. We all were in agreement to recommend to the search committee that he be pursued to fill the vacancy as our Senior Pastor.

Respectfully Submitted,
The Church and Ministry Committee

Thank-you Dale. I know the search committee and congregation are grateful for the preliminary work your congregation has already done. It's kind of funny isn't it? Except it's not. Certainly it isn't for all of the women who try so desperately to get jobs as ministers. A majority of pastoral candidates in our denomination are women. A majority of the senior pastor jobs go to men. In the Hickory area where I previously was, Jane Mitchum pastored a Lutheran congregation. The congregation loved her. But even she will tell you that if she hadn't been the associate pastor first, the congregation would have never chosen her to be pastor. Now not all the jobs go to married men. Sometimes single men get jobs as well. At his first congregation, my friend Scott endured 4 years of the church trying to figure out if he was gay or whether they could hitch him up with somebody. We absolutely have our expectations, about who should go to the Final Four, about who should be president, about kings, about pastors, ... and about the messiah.

So why was Jesus ultimately done away with? Why was he considered to be a threat by the authorities and rejected by the crowds? Because he wasn't what we were looking for. We wanted a king with robes; this guy wore the equivalent of a cardigan sweater. We wanted a military leader who could wield a sword; this guy got on his knees with a towel and washed feet. We wanted a

guy who would surround himself with the best of the best; he chose for his cabinet blue collar fishermen and IRS agents. We wanted the kind of man who would appeal to the faithful like Nicodemus; Jesus repelled the faithful and attracted the last people you'd want to share communion with. We wanted someone who would rub us on the back and tell us we're wonderful and everything's honky-dory; instead he rubbed scum on the back and told us we needed to repent. And let's face it, we wanted neat, tidy answers in black and white. And what did we get? Obscure parables and rambling monologues and talk of an unpredictable spirit. In the Gospel of John, nobody who sees can see Jesus; only the blind and the unwanted can see in this gospel.

How about us? Do we see? In Newton, NC there is a soup kitchen called the Corner Table. I usually cooked there quarterly. One day I was surprised to find one of the individuals reading a Penguin Classic book while eating. I took a closer look. He was reading Socrates. So why was I surprised? Did I think smart people can't fall on hard times or become homeless? Did I think homeless were intellectually incapable of reading philosophy? My surprise says more about my blindness than it does about the man reading Socrates. Which begs the question: to what degree do we really see? I think our expectations and assumptions frequently blind us, and not just to basketball teams. The religious authorities today mockingly ask Jesus if they're blind. Why yes... yes you are. And so are we. Sometimes there is a scholar before us, but we see a person of limited capability. Sometimes there is a king before us, but we see a scrawny kid. Sometimes there is a national champion before us, but we see a bunch of upstarts. How many people have walked through our doors and we have been completely blind as to who they are? How many would have blessed us if only we could have seen.

This church is entering a time of discernment, and not just about who your next pastor will be, but more importantly, about what kind of church will you be? Where are you going? What opportunities will this church embrace? But to engage in discernment necessarily means you strive to come to terms with your expectations and assumptions. There might be a Deborah or a David ready to become this church's pastor. So in short, will we see with the eyes of the world? Will our blindness prevent us from seeing with the eyes of faith? I'm not sure how to end this sermon other than by reminding you that we are all blind, and two, by asking some questions. So in lieu of a response or a statement of faith after the sermon, I'd like you to consider in silence some questions.

- 1) What might our church need to see in order to move more purposefully toward a new future, new hope, new possibilities?
- 2) What hidden truths & realities just under the surface, does our congregation need to see?
- 3) Are there unrecognized leaders and spiritual guides within the life of our church who are not being used, while the "important" matters are discussed by the residential experts and authorities?
- 4) What are the standards we use to judge what we see, whether it's a person, a building, a mission or ministry?
- 5) When--and how--does our church take time to encounter Jesus Christ and to hear the truth that transforms our lives, to follow in a new path that we previously could not even see?
- 6) Is it tempting to claim our identity based on what has gone before and on our ancestry, rather than on who God calls us to be, to become, today and in the days ahead?
- 7) How do you sense a still-speaking God, calming our fears and calling us to a new boldness and a new faith?

What is God calling Peace UCC to see? What assumptions do you have that will get in the way of seeing what God wants you to see? Amen.