

Body Talk: Beauty in the Eyes of the Beholder

1 Samuel 16:1-13

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I have a confession to make. Over the last few years, I've become a big fan of the TV show called "Queer Eye". Now, I generally don't go in for reality shows or makeovers, so when Emmett first introduced me to "Queer Eye", I was skeptical at best. But I quickly came to really enjoy it. Every episode is like a celebration of humanity and an infusion of hope!

If you're not familiar with it, the show features five gay men who give people what I would call a whole life makeover. The people they help are nominated by friends, family, or colleagues and, if the story they tell is compelling, the fab five steps into the life of that person for one week to try to make his or her life better. The "hero" of the week gets a beauty makeover, a cooking lesson, new clothes, and a refurbished home.

What makes the show meaningful, to me at least, is that the people they help are just ordinary folks - a teacher, a mechanic, a social worker. Most of them have faced some sort of adversity in their life - they were left to raise children on their own or have just lost their lifetime partner or maybe they are estranged from their family or lost their job. They are people who are struggling with self-esteem. So, one element of the show is helping them to identify what has hurt them and put it in a new perspective. That, in turn, gives them the self-confidence and courage to make real changes in their lives.

Underlying the premise of the show are a number of questions about how we see ourselves and each other. What makes a person beautiful? Who decides? Where do the messages we receive about worth come from? What is the relationship between inner beauty and physical beauty? If God made all people in God's own image and called humanity good, why do so many people hate how they look? Why is the beauty industry in the U.S. expected to have revenue over 108 billion dollars this year?

We're nearing the end of our "Body Talk" sermon series, and today we're going to focus on what the Bible tells us about beauty and our bodies. Have you ever noticed how free people feel to judge each other's physical appearance? It happens all the time. We judge height and weight and hair and facial features, how people walk, how fit they appear, how they are aging if they're older, how their bodies are maturing if younger. We evaluate and assess and compare all the time. Sometimes, these are harmless observations, but more often than not, there is an element of judgement, as well. Thick, full hair is good; balding is bad. Thin is good; fat is bad. Some make up is good; too much is bad. Male or female is good; anything else is, at best, suspect.

The standards by which we assess beauty have been passed down from generation to generation and have been heavily influenced by the ancient Greeks. With each generation, there may be new trends that reinforce or shape the standards, but they have actually changed very little.

Yet, people of the Ancient Near East, specifically the Hebrew people, viewed beauty somewhat differently than we do. In their book *Body Symbolism in the Bible*, biblical scholars

Silvia Schroer and Thomas Staubli write that in ancient Israel, beauty was seen as less about form or appearance and more about activity or expression. For example, the beauty of eyes was not their physical characteristics but what the eyes conveyed in a glance or a gaze. Also, they believed every concrete body part points to some sort of abstraction so individual parts have symbolic meaning. The hand could ward off evil. The throat represents the breath of life.

Here is an example from Proverbs 6:16-19. There are six things that the Lord hates; seven that are an abomination to him - haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that hurry to run to evil, a lying witness who testifies falsely, and one who sows discord in a family. Notice that there is no discussion of how the eye or the hands or the feet look. What is meaningful is what the body parts convey or do.

Furthermore, in Ancient Near Eastern thought, the ideal of beauty was not physical but relational. It is not the individual who is beautiful but the relationships between two or more people. God happens where human relationships flourish. God reveals Godself in community - peaceful, respectful community.

All of these insights from Schroer and Staubli are helpful background when we look to scripture for a faithful understanding of beauty and embodiment. Take, for example, this story from 1st Samuel that is our scripture reading today. Samuel is a prophet whom God sent to anoint and mentor the first King of Israel, Saul. The two became close through the course of Saul's long reign, but eventually Saul disobeyed God, and God sent Samuel out to anoint the new king God had chosen. King Saul was tall and handsome, looking just as people of the time expected a king to look. So, when Samuel goes to find the man God has chosen to follow Saul as king, he assumes this person will also be tall and handsome.

In our scripture reading, we enter the story after God has sent Samuel to the family of Jesse, a farmer in Bethlehem. Jesse has eight sons, and God has told Samuel one of them will be the next king. When Samuel sees the eldest, Eliab, he assumes this is the son God has chosen because, like Saul, he is tall in stature. But God says 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." Samuel considers six more of Jesse's sons, but the Lord rejects them all. Finally, Samuel learns of the youngest son, just a boy really, who is out tending the sheep. When this child, David, comes before Samuel, God says, "This is the one." Samuel anoints him the new king on the spot.

David, too, was handsome, but God doesn't look at his appearance but rather at how his appearance conveys what is in his heart. What do his glances, his gestures, his stance communicate about the person he is?

I mentioned earlier that in Ancient Hebrew people thought individual body parts had symbolic meaning. Schroer and Staubli write that "in the Bible, where the relationship between the inner and outer person is the constant subject of reflection and discussion, the heart is a central idea...but heart in Hebrew does not mean the same thing as heart in English or German." There is overlap but there are also differences.

In Hebrew, “heart represents the center, the innermost part of the human being”. As we hear in Psalm 139, God knows our innermost parts of intimately having formed them and knit them together in our mothers’ wombs. The heart holds our fears and our calm, our joy and desire, our pride and our insecurity. Simultaneously, it is the home of our intelligence and reason, memory and recollection, decision-making, secret plans, and conscience.

So, what God says that the Lord looks on the heart of a person, it tells us that God isn’t interested in our height or weight or the color of our eyes. The things we used to judge people. Rather, God looks to who the person is and how the person’s inner beauty is reflected in their actions. David is chosen to be king not because he has striking eyes but because his eyes convey a person who will trust in God, will be reverent and faithful and dedicated to God’s purposes in the world.

What a different world we would live in if we stopped judging ourselves and others based on what we see at first glance. Imagine watching a video of yourself and rather than having an immediate negative response, as many of us do when we see our physical selves, taking a moment to just observe what our eyes, our smile, our movements convey about the beautiful person God has created us to be.

Imagine walking down the street and as you see the person walking toward you or sitting on the sidewalk or driving by, intentionally stopping yourself from assessing them against the punch list of physical characteristics we’ve learned are important - height, weight, hair color, quantity of hair, age, physical fitness, shape of face, proportions, and so on. And then taking a moment to see the person as fearfully and wonderfully made. Looking for who the person is at their center, in their heart.

That would be an entirely different way to walk through the world - just starting from the assumption that every person is beautiful. It would be an entirely different way to think about ourselves, as well. Best of all, we know that this is how God sees us. Our hearts are what matter to God - that is where our beauty comes from. And we see that modeled in Jesus, as well. Jesus doesn’t comment on physical appearance. He doesn’t judge the length of a person’s legs or the size of their waist. When he interacts with bodies, it is to lift them up when they have been mistreated or denigrated or to heal them when that is desired.

As we wrap up this sermon series, there is so much more we could explore about what scripture and the teachings of our faith tell us about being embodied. Yet, what I hope you will walk away with is assurance that no matter what your body looks like - its color, size, age, gender, ability - God loves, accepts, and celebrates you exactly as you are. God has no interest in your physical appearance or the flaws you see in your body but cares only that you grow in love, in compassion, and in courage to care for the bodies around you.

May it be so. Amen.

