

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church  
By Scott Rushing  
**“Training The Little Engine That Could”**  
June 14, 2009

When I was a child, I loved playing with cars, trucks, trains. Anything that moved, and made noises, they found their way into my toy box.

One of my favorite childhood stories involved one of those toys...how many of you (no need to raise your hands) remember “the little engine that could”? After doing a little research (otherwise known as the internet), I discovered that the story of the “little engine that could” has been around for about a century now. You know the story – a long train with a heavy load must get over the mountain. Engine after engine refuses to take the burden on for themselves, until at last the smallest of the engines is asked to do the seemingly impossible. The little engine agrees, and up the mountain it goes, repeating all the way: “I think I can; I think I can.” Of course, the little engine that could, in fact does climb the mountain.

Why is it that this story has survived for generations, and has become such an endearing story that parents continue to repeat it to their children? Perhaps it is because we love to tell the story of the underdog. And the little engine that could is an example of the modern underdog story.

You know what I mean by underdog, right? We love those stories about people who face insurmountable odds, and then, well, they surmount the odds. We love stories about people who are supposed to fail, and yet they don’t fail. Somehow they succeed. We e-mail to each other YouTube videos of people whose hearts are bigger than their critics. I’m thinking of the recent Susan Boyle phenomenon.

Yes, we love underdogs. Maybe you recognize some of these underdogs...

Rocky Balboa...  
Forrest Gump...  
Joe Namath and the New York Jets in Super Bowl 3...  
The “Miracle on Ice”...  
Rudy...  
Oscar Schindler...  
Luke Skywalker...  
Tom Brady...  
William Wallace...  
Frodo Baggins...  
Eric Howell...

If I were to go around the sanctuary here and ask for more examples, we could be here all day. But I think these examples suffice to make the point. So now we ask this question: What do all of these “underdogs” have in common? They all were moved by belief. Their faith... determined their fate. Judging by outward appearances, few people, if any, would have predicted their success. Only by judging their hearts could we have known that they could overcome.

But it is not just in our modern narratives that we find stories of men, women, or even anthropomorphic trains who succeed far and above whatever low expectations were assigned to them. Sometimes the Bible tells the underdog story, too. But the Scriptures tell a slightly different version of the underdog story than our modern tales. Let that thought sit with you for a minute, and I promise to return to my cryptic comment.

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The Bible is replete with stories of men and women who overcome tremendous obstacles to climb their respective mountains, metaphorically speaking of course.

Moses was such a man. He stuttered...He fled his home after killing an Egyptian... He cast his lot with the Hebrew slaves against the most powerful empire the world had ever seen. And yet he led the Hebrews to freedom.

Peter was also such a man. Peter stumbled time and time again. One time he stumbled so bad that Jesus called him “Satan.” You can’t stumble much worse than that. But Peter became the rock upon which Jesus built his church.

In this week’s lectionary text, we find yet another story of a man whose name would ultimately become synonymous with success. His name is David. Now, you may have trouble thinking of David as an underdog, or as anything other than a sublime example of achievement. We tend to remember David as the great king who united all the tribes of Israel, whose house would become that of the Messiah.

But in this story, David is not the great king. Not yet. In fact, when Samuel asks Jesse to invite his sons to a sacrifice – in anticipation of anointing a new king – Jesse does not even bother to invite David. David is the youngest, the runt of the litter, so to speak. When Samuel asks if there are any other sons, David seems to have been a mere afterthought. “Oh, that’s right. I do have another son. Silly me, I forgot. He’s just the shepherd.” But it was the youngest son, the one Jesse thought least likely to be chosen, who became the anointed king of Israel.

Why would the writer of the Book of Samuel present David in such a fashion? After all, this is not any ordinary character in the biblical narrative. This is King David. For hundreds and hundreds of years following David’s death, the Israelites would look back on his reign as the glory days in their history. Scores of psalms are attributed to the “man after God’s own heart.” When the Israelites looked forward, they took reassurance in God’s promise that the House of David would last forever.

There are probably a number of good reasons why David is presented as the lowliest of the lowly in our introduction to him. The text points to one possible reason. Samuel informs Jesse that the LORD does not see as we see. People look upon the outward appearance...but the LORD looks on the heart.

It is not by accident that this teaching is included in a text that paints David as the “underdog.” The LORD does not select the candidate for kingly anointing that we think would be the most likely candidate. The LORD selects the one who wasn’t even brought forward by his own father for selection. At this point in the story, David was simply a young boy who cared for his father’s sheep. This is not yet the man who would defeat Goliath (talk about your sports underdogs!), nor is he yet the man who would usurp Saul’s throne, and reign peaceably for a generation.

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Up to this point, I have claimed that we enjoy hearing underdog stories, and that the narrative of David’s anointing was just such a story. I have also made the claim that this characterization of David as the underdog helps the Hebrew writer articulate the point that God does not see as we see; God does not look on the outward appearance, but God looks on the heart. –

For the apostle Paul, this was a crucial teaching not just about the way in which God sees the world, but it now becomes a means of pointing us towards seeing creation the same way God sees creation. Paul quotes this very text from 1 Samuel in his letter to the Corinthians, immediately after remarking that “we walk by faith, not by sight.” The apostle appropriates the teaching in 1 Samuel that God looks on the heart, rather than outward appearances, and he now claims that in Christ we can do the same. And when we look upon the heart, rather than the outward appearance, we will walk by faith, not by sight.

The context is this: Paul is speaking to the Corinthians about the relationship between the temporal and the eternal. Our time here is temporal...like the rich man who is spoken of in the epistle of James, we will pass away like the grass. Here today, gone tomorrow.

These bodies are temporal. In these bodies we groan, for we have not received our resurrection bodies yet. In this life we suffer and we are burdened, and we are mortal. We are separated from our Lord by these finite bodies. We ARE more than our temporal bodies. We ARE more than our limitations. But with our mortal eyes, all that we can see is finiteness, temporality, and limitations.

But when we walk by faith, we see more than that. This is why Paul says we can be of good courage. Life does not cease to be when our bodies pass away. That is the outward appearance of things. But God looks on the heart. And in faith, we find that it is the love of Christ that urges us on, because he died for all. And he died for all, so that those who live, might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.

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The question that we struggled with at lectionary breakfast was...how do we “train” ourselves to walk by faith, and not by sight? Does this come to us naturally? Or do we struggle to come to this place in our walk with Christ?

Paul seems very concerned in this passage to make the point that this is not something we do individually. It is not “I” who walks with Christ – it is “we” who walk with Christ. “**We**” walk by faith, not by sight...“**We**” make it our aim to please him...“**We**” know the fear of the Lord... The love of Christ urges “**us**” on... “**We**” no longer live for ourselves, but for Christ.

Just like “the little engine that could,” it is my tendency to come to the Christian pilgrimage thinking that I am alone in this journey. I was taught from a young age to be all that I could be... to pull myself up from my own bootstraps...to be self-reliant...that everything I needed to succeed in life was within me.

But that is not the gospel story. Throughout the Bible, from Abraham to the apostles, the consistent witness of Scripture is that we are not “the little engine that could”, pulling the train by ourselves. Instead of “I think I can, I think I can”, Scripture teaches us to say instead “**we** walk by faith”... “**we** will overcome”... “Christ died for **us**.”

Additionally, our walk in faith is not governed by our own desires or ambitions. Our walk in faith is governed by the love of Christ. It is Christ’s love that urges us on so that we might live for Him. And Christ’s love is defined by selfless charity.

Christ’s selfless love for us led Him to the cross. The mystery of the cross is the ultimate example of how God sees the heart, rather than outward appearances. By outward appearances, Christ’s death on the cross is foolishness. Where is the wisdom in proclaiming that God conquered death by putting to death His Son? But it is in the cross that we are given a glimpse into the heart of God. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but have everlasting life.”

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What is it about the communal nature of the body of Christ that enables us to walk by faith, not by sight? Let me draw your attention to what it is that we do as the body of Christ. First and foremost, we come together in worship.

Our worship is a means by which we learn to see with the eyes of faith. Consider the work that we do in worship –

...we listen to Scripture as it is read to us,  
 ...we hear the word of God as it is proclaimed through the sermon  
 ...we pray,  
 ...we confess our sins through the litany,  
 ...we meditate silently,

– these are all practices which develop a contemplative perspective upon life. We come together every Lord’s Day as the body of Christ to proclaim together God’s sovereignty over creation, and that we follow Christ in discipleship.

But these practices we also take with us during the week, as we do our daily work that we have been called to. During the week we have available to us these same practices of reading Scripture...prayer...silent meditation. Through these practices we come to see the world not by sight...we come to see the world by faith. We begin to see others not by their outward appearances, but by their hearts.

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Christians for centuries have struggled with this same question that we are asking today: how do we see with the eyes of faith? And one of the answers the Tradition has passed on to us is the practice of contemplative prayer.

Contrary to what I believed as a young man, contemplative prayer is not the practice of a person who likes to sit and think, nor is it mere thoughtfulness or reflection (Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 9). Contemplative prayer is the practice of seeing the world from the divine perspective. As Thomas Merton says, contemplative prayer is “spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life...it is gratitude for life, and for being...it is the vivid realization of the fact that life and being proceed from a transcendent and infinitely abundant Source...contemplative prayer is the response to a call from Christ who speaks in the depths of our being. Contemplative prayer is the awareness that it is no longer I that live but Christ lives in me.” (*New Seeds*, 1-5).

The beginning of contemplation is faith (*New Seeds*, 126). Faith is not some subjective feeling that God exists, but it is an act in which we are content to know God by loving God. Faith is the opening of the inward eye, the eye of the heart, to be filled with the presence of the Divine.

So to answer the question, how do we “train” ourselves to walk by faith, and not by sight...We come to this journey not by our own strength. Chanting a mantra of “I think I can, I think I can” will not get us to the end which we seek. The definition of the underdog as the man or woman who gets to the top of the mountain through one’s own strength is a modern invention, not faithful to the gospel story. Through our worship...our fellowship and selfless love for one another...and through contemplative prayer, then we will begin to see with eyes of faith. And what we will find is that we did not make it on our own, but in Christ, the Source of all Being and Light of all Souls has drawn us unto Him. Amen.