

and families were not charged a penny. Couney’s incubators were both state of the art and the last resort for many families. And his work indeed saved thousands of lives. One woman who had been a premature baby in Couney’s care years later said, “Nobody else was offering to do anything to save me. Without Martin Couney, I wouldn’t have had a life.”² Though Couney did become wealthy from his efforts, he was committed to the thriving and nurturing of the vulnerable children in his care. Couney encouraged his staff to cuddle and hold the infants to demonstrate to the public that they were real, human children deserving of love and care; not the specimens or mistakes many people thought. To anyone who thought premature infants were nothing but a nothing, Couney’s commitments said otherwise. His work laid the foundation for modern neonatal intensive care and improved the standard of care around the world for babies born early.

God used an unexpected person—not a professor or famous doctor—to care for vulnerable children at a time when there were few other options. God must have been at work in Couney’s heart to help clean out the distorted beliefs that swirled around him about the worth of premature children. Though today we would absolutely expect different methods, Couney used the tools he had to save lives and to demonstrate the meaning of all life, even the most vulnerable. Were his heart and methods 100% *pure*? Probably not. But his heart was uncluttered enough to make room for God to direct his actions.

In these times when the future of special education seems shaky and access to healthcare for all people continues to be uncertain, I am grateful for the reminder that God has a pattern of calling unexpected people into service. God wants, needs, and chooses the least, the last, the lost, the lonely ones. We should not stand in God’s way by assuming that only the best and brightest or the strong and robust are the ones God will use to bless the world. We are invited to clear away some of the values and expectations that clutter our hearts. We are called to create a spaciousness within us so that God can enter in. And when God has room to move in our hearts, then our thoughts may become closer to God’s thoughts; our ways closer to God’s ways. Like Samuel, we will be better able to hear God’s leading, even when it surprises us.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

1 Amy G. Oden, “Commentary on 1 Samuel 16:1-13 and Psalm 51:10-13,” October 19, 2025, *Working Preacher*, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/god-calls-david/commentary-on-1-samuel-16:1-13-psalm-51:10-14-4>

2 “How one man saved a generation of babies,” May 23, 2016, BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-36321692>

October 19, 2025

19th Sunday after Pentecost

“An Uncluttered Heart, An Unexpected Call”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Samuel 16:1-13 and Psalm 51:10-14

As a kid, I really loved the Cinderella story. My family played a lot of Cinderella in our basement and my favorite Cinderella movie version was from the Faerie Tale Theater series. It was a live action movie featuring Matthew Broderick as the prince, and it included two really annoying step-sisters and a very mean stepmother. In the movie, right after the ball, the prince and his footmen head out of the palace. They go searching for the owner of the glass slipper left by the mysterious woman who enchanted the prince, but who ran away at the stroke of midnight. There’s a montage of the prince and footman trudging house after house, with fair maidens from all over the land trying to shove their feet into the dainty glass slipper. After many exhausting days of searching, they happen upon the cottage where Cinderella and her step-family live. Once inside, the prince kneels down to each of the step-sisters to yank and pull as they desperately try to get the shoe to fit. To no avail. The prince is at a loss, devastated that he still has not found the maiden whose foot fits the shoe. As he and his footman make their way to leave, out of the shadows comes a figure who says, “well, maybe it will fit me?” The stepsisters and mother break into loud, dismissive laughter. The prince asks, “what’s so funny?” And the stepmother says, “Well, it’s just Cinderella. She’s nothing but a nothing.” The prince decides to let her try the shoe anyway. Of course, when he slips it on her foot, it is a perfect fit.

This is a fairy tale, not a piece of scripture. But the dismissal of Cinderella by her family helps us consider who we expect God to call; and who God thinks counts. To the step-family, Cinderella was nobody. She did not count. She was off in the shadows and her presence did not matter. When Samuel went on the journey to anoint a new king on God’s behalf, God sent him to Jesse in Bethlehem. The story tells us that Jesse and his sons were there. The group made a sacrifice and worshiped. And then a parade of sons walked by Samuel. “Is this one meant to be king? Or this one? Or this one?” Samuel asked God. No, no, and no. All the way through Jesse’s seven sons. When God said no to each of them, Samuel, like the prince, assumed he had failed. But just like there was one more woman in Cinderella’s house, it turned out, there was

one more son. He was keeping the sheep. He was doing that lowly job out in the shadows, away from home. It was a task not for the oldest, strongest, and bravest son, but for the youngest and smallest one. The one not set to inherit anything; the one who nobody really seemed to miss while he was gone. But since Samuel was asking, someone went out into the field to find young David. When David returned, God's guidance to Samuel was clear: this is the one called to be king!

In this story, God does again what we have been talking about this fall. God chooses an unexpected person for a very important calling. We saw it with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—people who had trouble following God's lead and living in faithful ways. We saw it with Sarah whom God was determined to bless with a child, even when she laughed at the audacity of such a thing happening to an old woman like herself. We saw it with Moses, who had a dubious past of his own, having killed an Egyptian before God showed up in the burning bush. We should know by now that this is God's way. God reaches out to the least and the last and the lost, and says "you, you are the one I will use to offer blessing." And so we should not be surprised when, in a few months' time, we show up in Bethlehem once more, to a feeding trough in a barn, and find not food for the cows and sheep, but God's own self lying in the manger. But we will be surprised again. Because God's tendency to choose and call the most unlikely people is so very different from the ways we operate.

The scripture says it plainly. Humans look on the outward appearance. But God doesn't see as mortals see. God looks on the heart. And then we heard the anthem and read the passage in Psalm 51: Create in me a *clean* heart, O God. If God looks on the heart, that must be what we are aiming for—clean hearts. When God saw David's heart out in the fields, that must have been how it appeared. It didn't matter that he was small and young, more handsome than tough. God knew by his heart that he would be a meaningful and important leader, even if not a perfect one. If God is seeking people with clean hearts to be God's servants, what should we be striving for? Does clean have to mean perfect? Because that's a bar none of us will meet. Does a clean heart mean we are supposed to be pure? Sinless? Innocent? Can we participate in *cleaning* our hearts, or can only God do that?

At my house, we have an ongoing conversation where one of us says, "the house is really dirty." And someone responds, "it's not dirty, it's just cluttered." Sometimes dirty means actual grit and grime; not great things we want in our house or our hearts. Clutter, on the other hand, gets in the way, but it's often easier to deal with. If we move a few things, put them where they belong, then there is room to move again; space to think. An uncluttered space helps us to breathe deeply and make room for what brings us wholeness.

Professor and spiritual director Amy G. Oden writes that maybe the kind of heart God is looking for offers a "cleared-out, decluttered interior

spaciousness." She goes on, "What if, instead of focusing on purity, we heard the psalmist inviting us to a sort of simplicity of heart? What if we joined the psalmist in praying for an uncluttered heart, one free from worries, resentments, score-keeping, or over-responsibility? This openhearted posture helps us be available for...listening and discernment..."¹

David must have had an uncluttered heart, open to God's movement and calling. But Samuel must have had an uncluttered heart, too. Samuel needed the room in his heart and the spaciousness in his mind to hear how God was leading him. If his heart had been cluttered with his own assumptions, not unlike our own, about power and privilege, then, surely he would have gone ahead and anointed the oldest son Eliab right off. Then the story would have taken a very different turn. If we intend to listen for God's guidance, then we are invited to look around our hearts, pick up and move out the things that may impede our understanding of the Holy Spirit. Just like decluttering our house, we need to set aside the old ideas and the expectations that are shaped by our human understanding of what (or who) is good and worthy. We need to dust away the detritus left by advertising and ideology that influences our choices and values. When we do, we stay alert and awake to how God might be surprising us and inviting us to act. With his uncluttered heart, Samuel stayed aware and curious about how God was leading him to David.

When we unclutter our hearts, we get closer to going where and how God calls. In 1903, Martin Couney, a man with some medical training in obstetrics, but no degree, began to declutter the ideas and expectations of the world from his heart. At that time, premature babies were often perceived as weak and unworthy of care. The eugenics movement was reaching a peak, which sought to "improve" the genetics of the human population through controlled breeding. Eugenacists often decried that premature babies would pass on their so-called "deficiencies, deformities, and vices" to future generations and so, without intervention, many babies simply died.

But Couney believed those were lives worth saving. Whether he would have put it this way or not, he seemed to see the image of God in each child. So he set up what was known as the Infantorium—rows of incubators which were then only in use to hatch chicken eggs. He hired nurses and wetnurses to attend and feed the babies around the clock. He emphasized strict hygiene in his facilities. The surprising thing was, his Infantorium was housed at Coney Island. It was a kind of side show with the marquee "All the World Loves a Baby." People paid 25 cents to come and lay eyes on these doll-like children. We gasp at that today. And many said it was exploitation even then, calling Couney a charlatan who profited off the suffering of others. But plenty of parents of premature babies were thankful for Couney's intervention; indeed, they had nowhere else to turn as the traditional medical system often failed them. The public's entrance fees paid for the high cost of this attentive care