

“A Hairy Problem”

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Based upon Judges 16:4-5, 15-22; Matt. 10:26-31

The last time I preached, before Rev. Dottie LaPenta graciously gave me a weekend off, I said that there was much that we could learn with God’s help during this time of waiting and quarantining. Many of the lessons that are coming out of this time are profound– lessons about community, about our idolatry of money and self, about our priorities and impatience. But sometimes those lessons come to us in packages that seem anything but profound at first. Case in point: today I want to talk to you about hair. You may or may not have noticed that I am now at the headband/barrette stage of quarantine hair, past my ability to trim it into anything that looks remotely normal. How about you? Are you realizing with much of the rest of the world how undervalued our hairdressers and barbers have been? Are you among the many who have watched your roots go from vibrant to gray, or your layers from fluffy to flat, your manly buzz cut to a shapeless shag, or your beard from George Clooney-esque to ZZ Top-esque? Despite the fact that hundreds of thousands of people around the world have died, and many more will because of the vicious efficiency of the Coronavirus, for some reason people in the United States at least seem to be focused less on publicly expressing grief for that lost, or outrage at the inequitable nature of the suffering, and more focused on grieving their loss of personal freedom, and expressing outrage about the state of their hair. The reason for the freedom focus is obvious; we’ve been locked down for months now being asked to practice a level of communal generosity and self-sacrifice our culture has ill-equipped us to embrace. But the hair focus seems more than a little bit out of sync with the life or death nature of this pandemic.

Still, whether it’s rational or not, in protests around the country, hair has been a hot topic. Instead of demanding relief for ICE detainees or prisoners, for urban dwellers or overworked healthcare workers, protestors, like the ones in the photograph on your bulletin cover, have been carrying signs protesting their bad hair. “We demand a haircut!” these young people cried. They weren’t trying to be funny. There are dozens more pictures like this on the Internet. “I want a haircut,” “Let us get our hair cut!” the signs read. Has our vanity really grown to the point that we are willing to sacrifice the lives of others for good hair? The answer seems to be an appalling “yes.” But my point in raising the subject is not to judge these people, but rather to invite us today to think about what we can learn from this because I think there is actually more behind this phenomenon than simple vanity.

One reason I think that is that two of the hoax cures for the pandemic that have been making the rounds on social media have to do with hair also. One hoax, that Snopes.com actually had to debunk, was that using a hair dryer to breathe in hot air can cure COVID-19 and stop its spread.¹ Don’t try this at home folks because it does not work. Another hoax said that God has placed a single miracle-working hair somewhere inside every Bible.² If you can find the one God

¹ Palma, Bethania, “No, a Hair Dryer Won’t Stop Coronavirus,” Snopes.com, Mar. 17, 2020; retrieved from <https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/hair-dryer-coronavirus>.

² Rashad, “Strange: There is a miracle hair in every bible that can allegedly cure Coronavirus,” GHPage.com, March 26, 2020; retrieved from <https://www.ghpage.com/miraculous-hair-bible-cure-coronavirus-strange-covid-19-news/121836>

left for you, then you are supposed to soak the hair in a glass of water for a while, then drink the water. According to the folks who believe this, then you will be magically cured. I wouldn't be surprised if we all could find at least a single hair in our Bibles if we flipped through them, since many of us are losing our own hair from stress. But please don't start drinking hair tea at home. It won't do you any good.

These ridiculous remedies, along with the protests, reveal that whether it should have or not, hair has now taken on a symbolic status in this pandemic. In the same way that the face of a masked healthcare worker now symbolizes a hero, hair now symbolizes both what is wrong with the world and how to make it better. "If we could just get our hair done," some part of our social psyche thinks, "then the chaos would be under control again, and our sense of security regained." It sounds absurd at first to think that we are consciously or unconsciously equating well-coifed heads with a healthy and happy world, but it isn't actually as far-fetched or even as vain as it sounds. Hair has always been a symbol of virility and health because evolution taught us to use hair as a means of sorting out the genetically ideal mates from the impaired. When we are sick, our hair tends to become drier, more brittle, and fall out more easily. So lush locks really are a sign of good health.³

But recently, a couple of studies out of Harvard and Yale have demonstrated that our hair does more than *reflect* our health, it actually *affects* our health too. Harvard researchers found that women had lower blood pressure after getting their hair done, especially if they felt their cuts or color made them look younger. Similarly, Yale researchers discovered that bad hair days do more than frustrate us for twenty-four hours. Have enough of them, and they have real negative effects on both men and women's mental health. Bad hair days are associated with increased social insecurity, self-criticism, poorer performance at work, and lower self-esteem.⁴ Even in quarantine you can see this playing out. I know multiple people who won't Zoom with the video feature turned on because they don't want anyone to see how their hair looks now. And among my Facebook friends at least, now that more and more woman can't hide their gray anymore, heated conversations are breaking out about whether it shows better self-esteem to let your hair be naturally gray or to color it. Whether it should or not, our hair influences both how we see ourselves and how others see us. It always has been this way. That's why Roman women sprinkled gold dust in their hair to show their wealth, and Marie Antoinette wore outrageously tall wigs with bird cages in them.⁵ Our hair is tangled up with our internal sense of identity and security, so when our hair feels wrong, we feel wrong.

We see this play out in the Old Testament story of Samson. There was nothing admirable about Samson as far as I'm concerned, despite the fact that an angel of the Lord tried to guarantee he would be a fantastic judge for Israel by making his parents make a prenatal

³ Vann, Madeline R., "7 Things Your Hair Says About Your Health" Everyday Health, April 2, 2019; retrieved from <https://www.everydayhealth.com/skin-and-beauty-pictures/things-your-hair-says-about-your-health.aspx>

⁴ See Diller, Vivian, "The Psychology Behind a Good Hair Day: How does a 'good hair day' affect us emotionally," PSYCHOLOGY TODAY, Feb. 18, 2012; retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/face-it/201202/the-psychology-behind-good-hair-day>; "The Psychology of Hair," YouBeauty.com, Dec. 5, 2011; retrieved from <https://www.youbeauty.com/beauty/psychology-of-hair/>; "The Power of a Great Hair Day," <https://www.jjosephsalon.com/the-style-files/psychology-of-a-bad-hair-day>.

⁵ *Ibid.*

promise. They promised to raise him as a Nazarite. The Nazarites were holy men of God who didn't drink alcohol, eat unclean food, or cut their hair, and who dedicated their lives to serving God. Samson's parents promised the angel to raise him this way, but despite their best efforts, Samson still managed to become a self-indulgent, misogynistic, womanizing, party boy with homicidal tendencies, and few reasoning or leadership skills. Very few people remember this about him, however. We put his story in children's Bibles despite his poor example because what we remember about him was that he had great hair. He never cut it and believed that it was his source of strength.

Samson finally discovers in the end of the story, after his enemy-spy girlfriend, Delilah, cuts off his hair, allowing him to be captured and blinded by the enemy, that it wasn't really his hair that gave him strength in the first place. Even though it was cut, he was able to defeat the enemy after turning to God in prayer. But we don't usually remember that part of the story either. What we remember, what our children remember, is that Samson was the guy with the magical hair. His sense of identity was supposed to come from his close relationship with God, but until the last few moments of his life, Samson's identity was far more closely tied to his long hair.

Our identities are supposed to come from our relationships with God more than from our hair too. But even if we are better people than Samson was, they don't, at least not completely. A whole host of factors, including our hair, or lack thereof, still play a big part in shaping how we see ourselves and our strengths. The quarantine has revealed this. But the good news today is that if we ask for God's help, we can not only learn to overcome these identity problems, we can also use the knowledge gleaned from our own hair issues to learn an important lesson about empathy and racial injustice.

This past winter an animated short film by Matthew Cherry called "Hair Love" won an Oscar. The film is about an African American father's challenges trying to style his young daughter's hair. I must confess that until the award drew attention to the film, I was unfamiliar with the Crown Act, which the film was written to draw attention to, or with the decades of prejudicial treatment that African American people have received from white people because of their hair. But it's shocking. In 1786, Louisiana prohibited African American women from wearing their hair out in public; they had to have it covered with a cloth. Ever since then, African Americans haven't had the liberty to decide how to style their own hair. As recently as 1981, a court of law upheld American Airlines' right to prohibit its employees from wearing corn rows. In 2018, a 6-year old African American child was not allowed to attend a private school in Florida with the hairstyle she preferred. In 2019, a young wrestler in New Jersey was forced to cut his hair in order to be able to compete.⁶

African Americans have been told for decades both implicitly and explicitly that if they want to work, their hair has to look "tidy," which is code for white or Eurocentric. A recent Dove study found that black women are 50% more likely to be sent home from work because of their

⁶ Harris, Naomi, Sanchez Olivia, "*'Hair becomes a proxy for race' Maryland black lawmakers vote to end form of discrimination,*" CROFTON-WEST COUNTY GAZETTE, April 9, 2020, A1 and A11.

hair than white women. “Straighten it, pull it back, cut it off, but don’t wear your hair in a way that actually works for your hair type, your sense of identity, or your culture,” they’ve been told. Is it any wonder then that years ago, when a little African American boy visited then-President Obama, he reacted by wanting to touch his hair? He realized that if someone with his hair could become president, then so could he. Yet right now, only 20 states have passed versions of the Crown Act, which prohibits discrimination against people of color for how they wear their hair. That means all across the country, this form of racial discrimination is still permitted and practiced, forcing men and women to live with what feels to them like bad hair days every day, in order to work and be respected and heard. To have natural hair, African American hair, they are told, is to be socially unacceptable.⁷ Think about what that message does to their self-esteem and sense of security!

Now, white people should not need hair issues of our own to motivate us to fight against racism and for justice for all. There are so many other points of contact that come from our common humanity that should be more than enough to motivate us in this regard. If we appreciate being able to wear masks while grocery shopping, we should be outraged when we hear that African Americans are being harassed and barred from shopping just for wearing masks in accordance with the rules. If we like to go jogging, we should be outraged when we hear of young African American men being murdered for jogging unarmed through the wrong neighborhood. If we like sleeping in our own beds, we should be outraged when we hear of a young African American woman being killed in her bed by police storming into the wrong apartment with guns blazing. If we like carrying cell phones, wearing hats, eating Skittles, letting our children play, walking to work or doing our jobs, and so on and so on, then white people should be outraged to hear that others cannot do these things just because of the color of their skin.⁸ Yet right now attacks on people of color in our country are higher than they have been in years, fueled by white supremacist factions that are not being sufficiently challenged by either the authorities or society. African Americans are being told and shown in hundreds of different ways that they can’t live with the same freedoms that white people do without risking their lives doing so. In effect, right now they are facing two pandemics at once— one caused by a virus which disproportionately injures them for both biological and cultural reasons, and one caused by a society which disproportionately injures them because of the color of their skin.

It shouldn’t take hair woes to make white people step up and speak out and say, “This is not acceptable and cannot happen again!” But since not enough people have said this after an

⁷ See Ellis, Nicquel Terry, and Jones, Charisse, “*Banning ethnic hairstyles ‘upholds this notion of white supremacy.’ States pass laws to stop natural hair discrimination,*” USA TODAY.com, Oct. 14, 2019; retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2019/10/14/black-hair-laws-passed-stop-natural-hair-discrimination-across-us/3850402002>; Payne, Teryn, “*Black Hair Has Always Been ‘Professional’— Now the Law Is Finally Recognizing It,*” MSN.com, July 3, 2019; retrieved from <https://www.msn.com/en-us/lifestyle/lifestyle-buzz/black-hair-has-always-been-professional%E2%80%94now-the-law-is-finally-recognizing-it/ar-AADLTMC>

⁸ This sermon was preached just a few days before Christian Cooper was threatened while birdwatching for asking a white woman to lease her dog in accordance with park regulations, and before George Floyd was murdered by a police officer kneeling on his neck, even while he and bystanders kept saying he couldn’t breathe. The litany of horrors just keeps growing. Here are some resources naming the many individuals who have lost their lives doing things that would be perfectly acceptable or at least non-lethal for white people to do: <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/29/865261916/a-decade-of-watching-black-people-die> <https://www.theroot.com/an-incomplete-list-of-things-black-people-should-avoid-1824032408>

endless stream of abuses, arrests, and murders, and not enough people are talking about the gross inequity of the suffering now caused by systemic imbalances in health care access, housing, employment, and more, then we might as well use society's current preoccupation with hair to help us get to the point when we can raise these issues. Let's talk about how our hair reflects who we are, and how we want the freedom to wear our hair in ways that make us feel good about ourselves. Let's talk about what makes us feel secure and like the people God made us to be. But when we do, instead of stopping with our own hair woes, let's also note that people of color have never been allowed to feel this way in any aspect of their lives including their hair. If we can use our frustrations now to help others feel in a visceral way the wrong that has been done for decades to our siblings in Christ, then our gray hairs and shags will have been more than worth it. Then maybe we will all use our power to demand the changes that will ensure that all of us are safe and truly free.

Jesus said, "nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul... Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs on your head are all counted. So, do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows." Right now, this pandemic is uncovering not just the real color of many people's hair, but also real ugliness in our society. We can look away, but if we do, we aren't doing what Jesus called his disciples to do. He called us to proclaim from the housetops the truth of the Gospel— that God loves *all* people. He called us to join in his ministry of reconciliation and justice. This can be scary to do. But the words of comfort Jesus offered his first disciples can comfort us too: "even the hairs on our heads are counted." In other words, God knows each of us in minute detail and is with us always. Let us find our identity in the one who knows us so well that he gave his life to set us free, and then let us work to set others free in his name. Amen.