



Before we get to the heart of today's sermon, a brief review of what happened in Second Samuel last week:

David was named and is serving as king of Israel and Judah. David has been called beloved of God. And, David as king is doing all the things that the prophet Samuel had warned the people that kings do: he sent their men into battle, he took the wife of Uriah and impregnated her, and he sent orders that will get Uriah killed to cover up David's wrongdoing. David has abused his power as king and others have suffered as a result.

Just as David planned, Uriah and his men have died in the war. And Nathan the prophet is sent to bring God's word to David that the Lord is displeased with the choices- the moral and ethical choices- that David has made. Nathan, as a prophet speaks the words that God gives Nathan to speak. Not always words about the future although in this case there are words that tell what will happen to David and his household in the future. The emphasis of a prophet is not about foretelling the future but rather about helping us return to right relationship with God.

We are not always much different from David. We want what we want and when we have the ability to take what we want, sometimes we don't stop a minute to consider whether we are harming ourselves- let alone others- by our actions. Sometimes we don't take the time to consider whether our acquisitions are best for us and for our family. Sometimes we don't take the time to consider how the acquisition fits into how we understand our relationship with God and our neighbor. Hindsight can be both wonderful and distressing: I didn't know then what this choice would mean. If only I knew then what I know now.

If you are like many, someone pointing their finger at you to tell you in no uncertain terms how you screwed up is more likely to result in your (and my) pushing back, seeking to justify or rationalize whatever action or decision is now being called into question. Maybe you've had this exchange with someone about something you are alleged to have said (or not said): yes, you did; no, I didn't; yes, you did; no, I didn't. Those kinds of exchanges are not helpful. They shut down communication and reflection rather than opening up an exchange into what might have been done or said differently that would then lead to better relationships in the future.

Nathan knows that if he directly accuses David of wrongdoing that David will push back and miss the message that God is displeased with what David has done and that there will be consequences for those wrong actions. If Nathan directly confronts David, and David doesn't get the message but rather becomes angry, David has the power to put Nathan to death. That has happened in Israel so Nathan might understandably be anxious- kill the messenger when you don't like the message.

Nathan uses a parable instead. The parable offers up a situation that David would understand to drive home the necessary point. A rich man and a poor man. David and Uriah. The rich man has plenty- David has several wives and concubines given to him from former King Saul when David became king. The poor man has only one- Uriah has only the one wife, Bathsheba. The one lamb is very dear to the poor man.

The rich man takes the poor man's single lamb because the rich man can. Because the rich man is stingy and doesn't want to offer up one of his own even though the rich man has many to replace the one. And so the poor man loses something very dear to him- the one lamb that ate with the family and was cherished. But the rich man doesn't see how important and dear this one lamb was to the poor man. He is oblivious to the pain and distress he is causing. The rich man simply takes because he can.

Nathan then asks David for his response. And, in good kingly fashion, David responds that the rich man should be put to death for depriving the poor man of a cherished family member. And then Nathan drops the bomb on David and says: hey, David. You are the rich man. You are the one who took the one lamb from the poor man. You are the one who should die according to your own response to the parable. You are the one who took the one lamb with no pity for the needs of the poor man. You are the one who had no compassion- you set yourself apart and above from the poor man, from Uriah, simply because you wanted and you had the power to take what you wanted.

This tale is a bit like the parable Jesus will tell of the speck in the neighbor's eye and the log in our own eyes. We are not very good, generally speaking, at seeing our own faults. We are often very quick to call our faults in those around us while remaining blind to the ways in which we sin and the ways in which we are at fault. It's easier for us to call our faults in others than it is to acknowledge our own shortcomings- especially when owning up to our own shortcomings means we need to do something in response. Changing our own behavior is not easy. Ask anyone who has worked to change a bad habit!

God, through Nathan, reminds David that there are consequences to actions. As a result of displeasing God, the child that Bathsheba is carrying will die – and so it is. As a result of despising God, the wives and concubines of David will be given to his neighbors. As a result of failing to care for the poor, there will be no peace in David's household and indeed his son Absalom will revolt. The consequences of David's taking of Bathsheba and ordering the death of Uriah will be present for the rest of David's lifetime. And it is not only David that will feel the

consequences: all of Israel will know that the Lord is displeased with David for God brings to light what David has done in secret.

This is not the end of the story, though. David, recognizing that he has sinned says so: I have sinned against the Lord. Nathan then replies: The Lord has taken away your sin. You- unlike the man in the parable that you said should be put to death- you will not die. But, because by doing this you have made the enemies of the Lord show utter contempt, the son born to you will die. The penalty that David will pay, the loss of this son by Bathsheba, is one that he will live with to the end of his own life. David does not get off scott-free. He will suffer the loss of this son and the other results God has put into play the rest of his life.

David's life is spared, perhaps, because David repents. David confesses his sin. There is no way David can undo what he has done: the taking and impregnating of Bathsheba and giving the orders that result in Uriah's death. Those actions cannot be undone. David will have to live with the knowledge that what he did was wrong and good people suffered because of his misuse of his power as king.

Repentance, though, resets the relationship between God and David. There is a reason that we read a portion of Psalm 51 when we read this section from Second Samuel. The introductory notes to this Psalm in my father's family Bible say: "The psalmist confesses his sin, and prays to be forgiven, and restored to God's favor... A Psalm of David when Nathan the prophet came unto him after he had gone in to Bathsheba."¹

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness; in your great compassion blot out my offences.

Wash me through and through from my wickedness and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me...

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me.

Give me the joy of your saving help again and sustain me with your bountiful Spirit (Ps. 51: 1-3, 11-13).

David, when confronted by Nathan with his sin, and recognizing his sin, turns back to the Lord. While there are and will be consequences to the sin, God seeks relationship with us regardless of how many times we fail to meet the mark. We are always called to repent and return to the Lord. In our confession of sin and repentance, we are offered new life. We are offered the opportunity to learn from our sins and strive to live a life in accordance with God's commands to love God and love neighbor. To treat all creation with respect and to promote mercy and loving kindness.

Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen in The Predicament of the Prosperous² invite us to consider the interchange between David and Nathan in this way:

¹ The Student's Bible (King James Version) 1907.

² Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978 page 128.

This story is not concerned with the opposition of the wholly righteous to the unredeemably wicked. Its lesson is that righteousness and sin exist side by side even within the covenant community. Thus, the church is never in the position of selecting only one of these roles. It is called to proclaim God's judgment on all that opposes God's desire for justice and fullness of life, but it is also required to receive and acknowledge judgment for its own participations that create brokenness.

Our weekly confession of sin is one way we, corporately, acknowledge that our world and our lives fall short of God's dream for us. Our sins are forgiven even as there may be life-long consequences for the choices we make.

David Brooks in [The Road to Character](#)³ draws distinctions between "resume" virtues and "eulogy" virtues. Resume virtues are those that help us get ahead in the world. Eulogy virtues by comparison are the ones we hope we will be remembered for.

Brooks notes that many of us focus on resume virtues to the exclusion of eulogy virtues. We are so focused on how to get ahead in a society which values success over moral character. The book highlights various people whose eulogy virtues set them apart. Brooks notes that the struggle against the weaknesses in yourself is never a solitary struggle. No person can achieve self-mastery on his or her own. Individual will, reason, compassion and character are not strong enough to consistently defeat selfishness, pride, greed and self-deception. Everybody needs redemptive assistance from outside- from family, friends, ancestors, rules, traditions, institutions, exemplars and, for believers, God. We all need people to tell us when we are wrong, to advise us on how to do right, and to encourage, support, arouse, cooperate and inspire us along the way (pages 12-13).

St. John's can be a part of this life journey. We are called to love each other which includes, when appropriate, speaking truth to power. Speaking the truth in love. Encouraging, supporting and cooperating with each other as we work to bring God's realm to fuller reality on earth. It matters that you are here and you are part of St. John's. You have a part to play in helping each one of us live into our eulogy and not only our resume virtues. *Thanks be to God for you. Amen.*

³ New York: Random House, 2015.

10 Pentecost- Proper 13

2 Samuel 11:26-12:13; Psalm 51: 1-13; Ephesians 4: 1-16; John 6: 24-35

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