

## **2 Samuel 11:27a-12:15**

But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD, and the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, ‘There were two men in a certain city, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.’ Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, ‘As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.’ Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; I gave you your master’s house, and your master’s wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. Thus says the LORD: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.’ David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the LORD.’ Nathan said to David, ‘Now the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child that is born to you shall die. Then Nathan went to his house.

### **“Truth Telling”**

At the end of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* Neville Longbottom, a underachieving wizard that never did anything right, was awarded 10 points leading his house to win the famed house cup for a year. He was given the points for confronting his friends Harry, Hermione, and Ron who broke the school’s rules the evening before. Dumbledore the Headmaster stated, “There are all kinds of courage. It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends.” Dumbledore is right; it takes courage to confront those with more power than us. When it comes to us recognizing our own sin, as David did after the prophet Nathan came to him, more than the courage of the confronter is needed to open our hearts and minds. The recognition of our sin takes recognition first of Truth. Courage will only get us so far. It is the Truth that sets us free.

When the people Israel cried out for a king to the prophet Samuel, he warned them that the king would eventually take from them, violating the protection he was supposed to give his people. Although David has done exactly what Samuel warned of, he was unable to recognize how far he has drifted from serving God and no one had stood up to him. After killing Uriah, David allows Bathsheba the time allotted by Israel’s law for mourning. Then David sends and brings her to his palace to be one of his many wives. No one knew all the aspects of his sin, only parts.

God sent the prophet Nathan who knows David will only hear the truth through a story that subversively confronts his sin. One preacher noted, “Before the prophet can use

a parable effectively in the royal courts, the prophet and the monarch had to worship together before the throne of God. This is because a parable tells truth through a position of weakness. If there is no common understanding ... then the (parable) loses its punch. No amount of explaining will make up for the lack of common understanding.”<sup>1</sup> The hearer arrives at truth about themselves from exposure to a greater Truth—the mercy and love of God already known to them.

Because David knows what justice and truth are supposed to be he reacts to Nathan’s parable saying, “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.” “You are the man!” Nathan told David.

You are the man. These four words coming after the parable of the ewe lamb had the power to shock even King David into awareness of his transgressions.

“I have sinned against the Lord.” David confessed.

Nathan proceeds to tell the whole truth, not only of David’s sin, but of God’s gracious ways. “I gave you everything! God said. I anointed you king, I rescued you from Saul, I gave you my promise and word...and you have despised me and my word”. What David did secretly, God will have done to David before all of Israel. David will now have to live through the kind of injustice he put others through.

Sometimes the lectionary stops in the middle of a story or cuts out sentences in the middle--which always leads me to wonder what they didn’t want us to read! The lectionary advised ending with Nathan saying to David “Now the Lord has put away your sin.” It stopped before Nathan was through speaking. The next thing he said, which we went on to read was, “‘You shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child that is born to you shall die.’ Then Nathan went to his house.” The message was delivered.

We are repulsed by this message! David is pardoned, and a baby dies. The sword shall never depart from David’s house leading first to the death of an innocent child. An incestuous rape, a murder of revenge, another son’s armed rebellion and his early death all follow. David’s family, as God proclaimed, falls apart although the covenant continues through his son Solomon.

Is God’s verdict fair? How can this sentence come from the God of justice and righteousness we proclaim? One commentator noted we should keep in mind that “To the writer and the original hearers or readers, this was a story of God’s mercy” even if it doesn’t sound like one to us today.<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes ancient Israel’s theology and our Christian beliefs depart from one another. This is such an instance. We don’t believe that God punishes current and future generations for our particular sin in a direct cause-and-effect way. Our sin surely affects future generations, but God does not choose to punish those that come after us.

“You shall not die. Nevertheless...the child that is born to you shall die.” We cannot rectify Nathan’s proclamation with the love of God we know revealed in Jesus Christ because we believe new life can be born out of sin—it’s the story of our living Lord. New life can be born out of sin for all, not just for a privileged few. While we were sinners forgiveness came in Jesus Christ; mercy for all. This verdict, that in Christ we are forgiven, is only just because God chooses it to be so.

“Jesus relied ... heavily upon parables. Here is a king who rejected the language of power for the ways of weakness. He did not summon the people to his throne. He did

not hand down decrees or issue new laws. Instead, he walked among the people, ate with them and talked with them in a language unbecoming his station. He spoke in parables, as if he were...a servant instead of the King of Kings. It is the scandal of the incarnation.”<sup>3</sup> The Truth came in the moral teachings of one whose power was manifest in weakness. Much like the way the Truth came in Nathan’s words to David subverting power for a story that claimed God cares as much for the weak as for the mighty.

Sometimes we might ask ourselves what are we doing here on Sunday mornings? There are so many other things we could be doing you know! We are doing something totally odd, countercultural, abnormal. We gather under the belief that the body of Christ is a place for all who know they fall short of God’s call to a more excellent way of life. We know we are sinners, we know we are forgiven—we seek to really live, freely in God’s grace.

We can speak parables through our lives. Like David, as we follow God’s call to live under God’s will and ways, our journeys will elicit many confessions of sin.

I’m reading a book by Father John Dear called *Living Peace*. Throughout the book Father Dear, a Catholic Jesuit Priest, gives steps for a spirituality of contemplation and action and tells of his own journey to try to follow Jesus’ call of peace. Dear makes many a confession and I want to share my favorite one. He is young, studying in his first or second year at Georgetown and a few of his friends and he decide to go to the Pentagon to witness to peace. They would just hold signs and offer to pray with people on their way in. Not more than a half hour into their witness, John found himself yelling and running up and confronting an employee walking in. There he was trying to witness to peace, but violence had taken him over. One of his brothers said, “John! No! Go home.” Those words must have sounded like “You are the man” did to David. John knew he had to really study not only peace, but the practice of it if he was going to follow that call of Christ to him. I can tell you as of 2006, one of the reasons I am reading his book is because I heard Father Dear speak at a conference, and he was truly the most peaceful person I have ever met. He has stripped his language of violence and loves his enemies. I am sure if we were to ask him, he would say he still battles urges to react to others with hate instead of love. He sure has come a long way from where he started though.

Barbara Brown Taylor has written that the difference between an audience and a congregation is: “An audience gathers to be entertained by someone else’s peculiar take on the truth, and to talk about it afterward. A congregation gathers to be engaged by the common truth that makes them who they are, and to do something about it afterward. Coming together for worship...we explore the time-traveling, ego-rattling, neighbor-loving dimensions of ‘our truth’...This has less to do with being of one mind than it does with being of one body. Taylor goes on to say “Corporate truth can become a flotation device that keeps us from testing the depths of the soul’s truth...” We must take the common truth revealed to us all into our individual callings and live it out as the Spirit inspires us—it can’t just stay here. It must travel with us out into the world. “The saving truth” Taylor says with relief “is that few of us are as noble as we hope or as fraudulent as we fear. We are human...held together both in public and in private by the ministering Spirit of God in our midst.”<sup>4</sup> What truth are you called to live into, or what is tearing you apart that you must give up? What might we need to make amends for? Our sin cannot conquer us, because the Truth has already set us free.

There is One who is righteous. A King who did not take from the people, but gave everything in love so we could be built into one Spirit, serving God. Our common vocation is to grow up into Christ who joins us together! May the Way, the Truth and the Life, God incarnate, guide our feet as we engage in our own truth telling. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin B. Copenhaver, “He spoke in parables - 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a” in Living by the Word. *The Christian Century*, July 13, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, Gene M. Tucker, in *Preaching Through the Christian Year: B* (Trinity Press International: Harrisburg, PA, 1993) 362.

<sup>3</sup> Copenhaver.

<sup>4</sup> All excerpts are from: Barbara Brown Taylor, “Telling Truths” in Faith Matters, *The Christian Century*, July 25, 2006.