

Pentecost 9B
2 Samuel 11:26 - 12:13a

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August 6, 2006

David & Nathan

²⁶When Uriah's wife heard that her husband was dead, she mourned for him. ²⁷After the time of mourning was over, David had her brought to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing David had done displeased the LORD.

¹The LORD sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, "There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. ²The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, ³but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

⁴"Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him."

⁵David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this must die! ⁶He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity."

⁷Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man! This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. ⁸I gave your master's house to you, and your master's wives into your arms. I gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. ⁹Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. ¹⁰Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own.'

¹¹"This is what the LORD says: 'Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity on you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will sleep with your wives in broad daylight. ¹²You did it in secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel.'

¹³Then David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD."

This past week Ted and I had dinner with a colleague of Ted's who is a Shi'a Muslim. We had a wonderful conversation about the differences in the various Muslims sects and the differences in the Christian denominations. When we talked about the concept of grace, he said that the Lutheran concept of grace is very similar to the Shi'a idea of grace. In spite of all we might do, it is God's grace that saves us, not our deeds. Then he shared a story from Shi'a teachings. I will do my best to retell it.

Once there was a man who lived the perfect life. He prayed every day, he did many good deeds and he followed all the Muslim canon of law. He was a good and faithful man. At the end of his very long and very perfect life, he died. When he got to heaven he was greeted at the gate and told: "Welcome! You may enter by the grace of God." He objected strenuously. "What do you mean by the grace of God? I earned this! I have done everything right. I deserve to enter for the life that I have lived." Again he was warmly welcomed, "You may enter by the grace of God." Again he objected! "I have earned this, I deserve to enter by virtue of my own life not because of grace!" So the heavenly man said: "Fine. You want to enter on your own merits. Let's look at all that you have done and see how it compare to the blessings God has given you." So they stacked up all the wonderful, obedient and perfect things the man had done. It was quite an impressive stack. The heavenly man stood back and said, "That is indeed a good stack. It is just about equal to the gift of vision." So for the third time he said, "You are welcome to enter by the grace of God." And the man went in.

Two weeks ago, we talked about the God-ness of God. David and the disciples both got a reminder that in spite of all the good they might do; God can still do much without them. Then last week, we read that David had done an abominable thing. David looked on Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, and desired her. He saw, he sent, and he lay with her. When David learned that Bathsheba had become pregnant by him, he tried to get Uriah to go home so that he would lay with his own wife and they could all say the baby belonged to Uriah. But Uriah, faithful and true, would not go into the comforts of hearth and home while the soldiers and the Ark of the Covenant slept in tents. So having failed to cover up his betrayal, David has faithful Uriah killed in battle.

This week we continue with part two of this sordid tale. After Uriah's death, Bathsheba is allowed the traditional days of mourning, which are seven, and then David takes her as his wife. David did not really need a wife. He already had wives aplenty; Bathsheba would make 8. And that does not include concubines. David was not lacking for company, nor was he lacking for sons. But David saw, he sent, he lay and now he takes Bathsheba as his wife.

But this thing that David had done displeased the Lord. To say the Lord was displeased sounds rather gentle and polite to our modern day ears. The Hebrew word for displease can also be translated as "was evil in the eyes of the Lord" or "was repugnant to the Lord." What the Lord was feeling was anything but gentle or polite. The prophet Nathan, speaking for the Lord, tells David a little parable. And David is appalled that the wealthy man would take the only lamb of the poor man for his own purpose. David calls out the proper punishment for such behavior: "This man deserves to die, and must repay the lamb fourfold!" Than Nathan says the fateful words to David: "You are the man."

How often have we ourselves sat in judgment of another only to be brought up short by the realization that what we despise in the other is a trait that we ourselves display? For some reason we can so clearly see fault in another person that we cannot see in ourselves. Jesus uses parables like this to open the eyes of the Pharisees time and time again. How painful it is to hear those words: "Well. Chris, that is just like you." And so Nathan starkly reflects to David the horror he has committed in the sight of the Lord. A sin made all the greater because it stands in such contrast to the faithfulness of the Lord and is a violation of that covenant relationship.

David in his greed and arrogance of power saw, and sent, and lay. The Lord on the other hand anointed, rescued, and gave David all that he had. And if it had not been enough, the Lord would have done more...if David had only trusted in the Lord. But in response to all that the Lord has done for David, David does what is evil in the eyes of the Lord and there will be consequences,

dire, public and humiliating consequences. What David does next is classic for David: he repents. He sees quickly and clearly the depth of his offense against God and he says, "I have sinned against the Lord." According the Hebrew law, both David and Bathsheba deserved to die for their adultery. Never mind that Bathsheba, as a subject of the king, had no choice in her part. The punishment for adultery was death. But because of David's repentance, the Lord in his great mercy said that he would not die. Someone else would die instead: this innocent child, born of sin.

Stories like this are harsh and hard to read. Does the Lord really plan to kill an innocent child in retribution for David's sin. This is not the kind of God we want to face, a vengeful, punitive God. David will suffer mightily for the loss of this child, but the child will die. There will be a terrible consequence for David's sin.

As much as we want to turn away from these stories in Scripture, we can't, we shouldn't and we don't need to. **We cannot** turn away from these stories because they are there, part of the canon of scripture that is the foundation of our faith. These are hard stories that raise hard questions in the minds of believers and seekers alike. What kind of God strikes babies, rains down armies and asks for the sacrifice of an only son? We don't like them but the stories are there and they deserve our attention even as they make us squirm.

We should not turn away from these stories because they are instructive for us. We are not so unlike David. The Lord has anointed us, rescued us and given to us and still like David we see, we send, we take, and yes, sometimes we lay. We act in contrast to the faithfulness of God and we violate our covenant relationship. We might read this story and say, well I would never take another man's wife or a poor man's lamb. We continue to trust in our own power to control the people and the world around us rather than trusting in the steadfast faithfulness of the Lord to provide and see to our needs.

And finally, **we don't need to** turn away from these stories because through repentance and grace we are assured that death can no longer lay claim to us, in spite of our sinfulness. A son has already died. The death of Jesus is a stark, harsh reminder of the ultimate consequence for our sin. But the resurrection of Jesus means that although there are still real earthly consequences for our sin, God has not abandoned us to our sin. God, who is merciful, sees our repentance and lifts the sentence of death from our heads. God's grace is bigger than our faithlessness, God's grace will hold fast to the covenant relationship.

This morning we heard Jesus say, "I am the Bread of Life." When Jesus first invited us to the Lord's Table he took, he blessed, he broke and he gave. And Jesus invited us as the Lord invited David, "Trust in me. I will see that you have enough. And yet if you need more, you have only to ask." Do you notice that when we come to communion, there is no rush to get the most, no rush to be first for fear there will not be enough, no need to grab what we want for ourselves. We come and it is given to us. There is always enough at the table of the Lord because God is faithful and merciful.

Looking back at our story from the Shi'a tradition...if the grace of God is so much bigger than all the good that we do...how much bigger is the grace of God than our sin. We are reminded again of the grace-filled God-ness of God and the privilege of trusting God in all things and the call humble repentance in the face of God's great mercy. Amen.