

Outdone by Grace

2 Samuel 11:26-12:13; John 6:24-35

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This summer has provided us with a couple of convenient examples of powerful men having to make very public confessions. The Governor of South Carolina became an especially convenient sermon illustration given this summer's lectionary by comparing himself to King David and also by holding too many press conferences. Senator John Ensign got less press, but also had to face reporters and cameras as he confessed to an affair, calling it a terrible thing and wishing that he could take back his "actions." Though both of these political figures are devout Christians, as was President Bill Clinton (to be bipartisan about it) before them, I don't think the word "sin" was ever used to describe their regrettable "actions." Maybe public figures avoid the word "sin" because they don't want to conjure up images of the tearful, lip-quivering Jimmy Swaggart who sobbed, "I have sinned against you, my Lord." Or maybe "sin" is a concept that seems outdated...confined to the walls of the church and out of place in halls of power.

"Sin" was out of place in the halls of power David had constructed...and far from his mind, too. He had taken, grasped, Bathsheba. She became pregnant. Then to cover up his "actions," he had her husband, Uriah the Hittite killed in battle, clearing the way for David to marry Bathsheba himself. It would seem that the child was his. There. David had gotten away with it. Possibly with rape. Certainly with murder. Walter Brueggemann places two verses of 2 Samuel 11 in tension with each other: In verse 25, after getting General Joab's report that Uriah has been killed as requested, David sends word back to Joab. David tells him that he should not let this matter trouble him, for these things happen in war. But then there is that little line tacked on to the end of verse 27: "But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord..." Now that is an understatement of biblical proportions!

This week, we continue to see how brutally honest the writer of the books of Samuel is willing to be, even about the beloved King David. I told you last week that the Chronicler completely omits the story of Bathsheba and Uriah. The writer of 1 Kings mentions it, but just barely. In 1 Kings 15, David's greatness gets full-court press, with only a teeny mention of the "recent unpleasantness." It reads:

"David did what was right in the sight of the Lord, and did not turn aside from anything that God commanded him all the days of his life, except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite." (1 Kings 15:5)

Yes, except for that, (*oh that little thing?*) David was a great guy...a wonderful king...faithful to God. Apparently, there is still a lot of energy invested in keeping David's reputation untainted. As recently as December of 1995, during a debate on some matter in the Israeli parliament, Shimon Peres, Foreign Minister then, was moved to say that he disapproved of some of the practices of King David, particularly of his conquest of other peoples, and his seduction of a married woman, Bathsheba, whose husband Uriah David had sent to his death.

“According to an account in *The New York Times* of December 15, 1995, outraged Orthodox rabbis screamed at the Foreign Minister to ‘shut up.’ Another shouted, ‘You will not give out grades to King David!’ A third man flew into such a state of apoplexy that he had to be treated for hypertension in the parliamentary infirmary, and a motion was introduced condemning the government for having besmirched the ‘sweet psalmist of Israel.’” (Peter Gomes, *The Good Book* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1996), 25.

Given what happens next in 2 Samuel, one wonders if David would approve of such continued vigorous defense by his admirers. You see, after David *sent* for Bathsheba, *sent* for Uriah to come home from the front, *sent* the order to Joab to have Uriah killed...chapter 12 opens with these words: “The Lord *sent* Nathan to David.” Now the action belongs to God. And God now does all of the talking, through his prophet Nathan.

And what God does is have Nathan tell David a story. It is the story of two men...one rich, the other poor. The rich man has flocks and flocks of sheep...and every comfort in life is at his fingertips. The other man barely has anything at all...really, just one little lamb. It is so precious and loved that it is like a member of the family. Like the daughter he never had. The poor man lets this one little lamb drink from his own cup, sleep by his own bed.

One day, the rich man has a visitor. He needs to prepare a feast for his guest. But he doesn't want to use one of his 1,000 sheep. Instead, this rich man sneaks over to the poor man's house. He takes, grasps, that little beloved lamb and serves it for dinner. Now tell me, King David, shepherd of God's people, King of all Israel...what should be done with this rich man?

David breathes fire! “Oh, the injustice, the cruelty of that man! He should die for his sin! I'll make him pay!” And here is one of the most important moments in David's life...Nathan looks at David and says simply, devastatingly, “*You* are the man.” Now David is the one holding his own death sentence in his hand. And he sees himself for the first time in a long while clearly, honestly: “I have sinned against the Lord.” As someone pointed out, this whole long, sordid story is structured around three terse statements by its three main characters: “I am pregnant.” “*You* are the man.” “I have sinned against the Lord.”

A lot of scholars make a point of saying that while we do indeed sin against one another, all sin ultimately is sin against God...and this is where our attention ought to be focused. On the breach in our relationship with God.

Brueggemann points to the tension, the discrepancy between verses 25 and 27 of 2 Samuel 11, where David is pleased but God is not. He says that at this point there is a collision of narratives. One is the story of how power is gained, used, and inevitably abused in the “real world.” The second narrative is about Yahweh’s counter plans for the world. What follows Nathan’s confrontational story is God speech...the recitation of all of God’s past graciousness. David thought he had acquired everything by and for himself, so he could use and abuse whatever he wanted. All belonged to him. But God tells the story differently...everything David has, has been a gift from God. David has abused others, violated commandments. But what angers God deeply is that David has abused the gifts and the trust of Yahweh. “The story Yahweh tells is a far cry from the royal narrative of David.” (These insights are from an article by William H. Willimon, “A Peculiarly Christian Account of Sin,” in *Theology Today*, Vol. 50, No. 2, July 1993.)

You’d think that such a hard collision of stories would produce a fatality. After all, God had every right to lower the cosmic boom on David. I suspect a lot of us have some lurking notion that God is not only able but ready to lower the cosmic boom on us at any moment. And we know our self-defense and character witnesses may provide weak testimony when compared to what God knows is really in our hearts and likely to be uncovered in a divine background check. Doesn’t confession always lead to condemnation?

But here is the amazing, grace-filled thing: Nathan did not come that day to condemn David. Nor did God. Yes, this sin, like most of our sins, will have terrible ripple effects ... consequences for others who were themselves quite innocent in the wrongs we commit. But God came to David that day, as God comes to us, too, to do something much more profound than condemnation. God comes to change our lives ... to help David (and us) see what we have done so that our conscience is revived and our sense of justice is restored. Only then, as Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, might “Israel have the king she was supposed to have instead of this handsome hero whose power had begun to stink.” (In *Bread of Angels* (Cowley Publications, 1997) 14.

Presbyterian minister and author Eugene Peterson says that to recognize and confess our sin is a momentous thing. But it is not, he says, the “main event.” “Our sins aren’t that interesting,” he notes matter-of-factly. “There’s nothing glamorous about sin...Sin is diminishing, dehumanizing, and soon dull.” God’s work on our sin is where the real action lies. David’s sin, enormous as it was, Peterson says, was wildly outdone by God’s grace. From *Leap Over a Wall* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), 189.

It is said that Psalm 51 is David’s heartfelt response to his encounter with Nathan. And a close look reveals that David understood where the real action was. Peterson notes that in Psalm 51 there are only four different words used to name the sin. The central action of that Psalm is carried by nineteen different verbs used to invoke or to declare God’s action of forgiveness and

restoration. Our sins are not that amazing or interesting...when compared to the amazing, multi-faceted grace of God.

Barbara Brown Taylor asks, then answers for herself: “Was David a good man or a bad man? You decide. I think he was both, as most of us are. If we remember him as a hero, I hope it is not because of Goliath, or the psalms, or the war stories. I hope it is because of that moment with Nathan, when he saw who he was and said so, so that God could say, ‘Come home.’” (Taylor, p.16.)

That, after all, is the point of confessing our sin. That is the point of telling the truth about where and how the story of our lives, of our world, competes and collides with the story God is telling, with the purposes God is at work accomplishing. Confession is not for the purpose of condemnation, but of restoration. So that we may have our conscience revived, our sense of justice reignited, our story corrected by God bigger story, our paltry vocabulary of sin outdone by God’s expansive vocabulary of grace.

When we are hungry for a better way to live, God is there...handing us the bread of heaven. When we are thirsty for a deeper, truer relationship...God offers us the cup of salvation. The Gospel truth is, no matter how terrible our sin, God is ready to receive us at the table...the place for truthful conversation, honest recognition, and grace that never runs out.

Amen.