

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 12) – Year B – July 29, 2009 - Homily
2 Samuel 11:1-15; Psalm 14; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21
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History is littered with famous men and women and their notorious sex scandals. I know you know what I'm talking about! And I know that several names from recent history may even come to mind quite readily. But what about the Bible? Perhaps because the Bible is so important to us, it is even more shocking for us to read all about such a scandal within its pages. Furthermore, maybe it's even more outrageous because it involves arguably *the* most famous king in the history of our Judeo-Christian tradition.

On Sunday, we talked about our economically-oriented habits of the heart and how quickly we displace Jesus for the sake of calculating the cost of discipleship. Fidelity in all our relationships is part of being a follower of Christ, and a way for us to grow into good stewards in God's service. As disciples, our relationships with God, with members of the Body of Christ, with others, and with money and possessions, are all enfolded and informed by God's steadfast love. As for our tendency to abuse our relationships with others, Thomas Chalmers puts it this way, "Infidelity is one of the false coinages – a mass of base money that will not pass current with any heart that loves truly, or any head that thinks correctly. It is a fearful blindness of the soul." What tonight's reading from second Samuel tells us plainly is that no one is above this temptation – even King David succumbed to adultery, which as circumstances would have it, led him into even deeper trouble, as he plots the murder of the wronged party to cover up his actions.

The story of David, Bathsheba and Uriah the Hittite is generally encapsulated by the story of war against the Ammonites. Given the language used in this passage, the obvious parallel becomes the "taking" of the city of Rabbah against King David's "taking" of the woman Bathsheba, followed by the intentional plan to "take" the life of her husband, Uriah. The judge and prophet, Samuel, warned the Israelites that kings were takers – takers of men, women, land and other resources (1 Samuel 8:11-19). His prophetic words come true, even for the great King David. Both situations involve the abuse of power and violence in order to achieve the desired result. Remembering that our personal ethics flow from our understanding of God's character and desire for our lives, King David apparently resorts to a distorted kind of ethics commonly known by the term, the end justifies the means.

Obviously, war involves the struggle for power, pitting one force over another and involving significant violence. But there are plenty of other ways to abuse power and the story of David's taking of Bathsheba is a prime example. David is king, and in the context of this story, there is no one on earth who has greater power over the Israelites. We are not told Bathsheba's name, except in the context of her position. She is Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam, wife of Uriah the Hittite. In other words, her life was never her own, her rights as a person were clearly defined by the patriarchal system under which she was born and lived. She is described for us a man's daughter, and a man's wife – never just Bathsheba. There is no indication that Bathsheba is raped by David, but there is every indication of a major inequity in the respective relative power and relative powerlessness between this man and this woman. On the one hand, there King David, on the other there is a woman, considered little more than property, who must obey. David sees her and wants her. He orders messengers to get her. When she comes he lays with her, and she returns to her home.

In the second part of this story, after Bathsheba tells David she is pregnant, once again

David uses his own powerful position to try to cover up his adultery. However, this time it is a man he is dealing with, and one who is blamelessly loyal and honorable in his relationships before God and with David his King. Being a man, Uriah has a little more control over his actions. King David's suggestion that he sleep with his wife was against the religious sanction that demanded all soldiers to remain celibate after being consecrated for war. Uriah the Hittite, one of David's warriors and servants, yet still technically a foreigner, provides a courageous contrast to David's adulterous scheming, and murderous behavior. It is not the last time in Scripture that a foreigner will teach God's chosen children lessons about faithfulness and integrity. We cannot know for sure, but we might do well to ask ourselves the question of whether Uriah had knowledge of what had transpired in his own house while he was away fighting David's war. Along with the question of whether Uriah knew that by steadfastly maintaining his own integrity towards God and David -- twice refusing to sleep with his wife at King David's invitation -- that it would cost him his life. Just as Jesus showed us that is the ultimate cost of faithful and obedient service to God and our friends.

If the abuse or misuse of power is one lesson here, then there is another key aspect of this story that can help us all. At the very beginning of this passage, we are told that David has not gone to war, even though he is the king, and it is the king's responsibility to fight for his people. Instead, David has sent his representative Joab to lead the war against the Ammonites. By not fulfilling his responsibilities as a leader in battle, David is idling his time away in Jerusalem, when he sees Bathsheba from the roof of the king's house. There is no more fitting summary of the situation than the old proverb, "The Devil finds work for idle hands". Looking at King David's story, and applying this advice to our own lives, we have to understand that this is not simply an admonition to be busy. It is, much more seriously, an admonition to honor God by fulfilling His call on our lives. That is, prayerfully offering ourselves to God's service and listening to God's direction. Practically, it will include periods of work, rest, and play, as well as time to be. To be with God, and to be quiet enough to hear the still small voice guiding us in all things.

Finally, David's errors are compounded when -- out of fear or pride -- he tries to find a way to avoid the consequences of his actions. If Uriah had acceded to his request, Bathsheba's pregnancy could easily have been attributed to the marriage bed. Yet, isn't it always the way that the truth will out, sooner or later. The consequences of sin are all around us -- it is painful to experience, and painful to see. Bathsheba's pregnancy was one consequence of David's moral lapse. Uriah's arranged death was another consequence of David's transgression. You and I are by no means exempt from our own peccadilloes. Nonetheless, we can learn from our mistakes and the mistakes of others. By God's glorious mercy, our salvation is assured by faith in Christ Jesus our Lord; we are blessed with a call to repentance and hearts softened by God's love to know when that is necessary. And by God's grace, the Holy Spirit is constantly working in our hearts and minds to transform us from our old lives in what Paul calls "the flesh", to our new lives in Christ. This is all part of the good news of God's unending love, mercy and grace, and a sober reminder of our never-ending need to remain humble before our awesome God. We cannot change history, but we can change the future, one life at a time beginning right here, right now.

Amen.