

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a, Psalm 51, John 6:24-35
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We all know about the indiscretions of FDR, John Kennedy, Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton, but these four presidents might be considered saints when compared to King David. It was bad enough that David slept with another man's wife, but Bathsheba was married to a man who was leading David's army in combat against Israel's enemies, the Ammonites. Furthermore, when Bathsheba becomes pregnant with David's baby, he recalls Uriah from the battlefield and tries to get him to lie with his wife so he would think the baby was his. This plan fails, however, because the honorable Uriah refuses to have pleasure with his wife while his men are fighting away from their families. (By the way, David's initial error was not to have gotten off the roof immediately upon seeing a woman other than his wife bathing. He stayed and watched too long. No wonder Jesus said if your eye causes you to sin pluck it out, and anyone who lusts after another commits adultery in his heart. {Matthew 18:9 and 5:28} Jesus knows what happens when our gaze strays and stays where it doesn't belong.)

David's resulting evil scheme, once Uriah will not spend the night with his wife, is to have Uriah set up to be killed in battle. David instructs his general to order Uriah to the front line of the battle and then have all the supporting troops withdraw so Uriah would be fighting alone and surely be cut down by the Ammonites.

Our first thought is, "How despicable!" We tell our children two wrongs don't make a right, yet here is the King of Israel, God's shining star, doing exactly that while plotting the murder of a loyal, noble and innocent soldier no less. "Top Level Cover Up," "White House Scandal" and "Egregious Abuse of Power" would blaze across the front page headlines of every newspaper for weeks if such a thing were to happen here today.

When our reading from 2 Samuel begins this morning, we find a mourning Bathsheba, having heard the terrible news of her husband's death, and a king who seems unmoved by the same news. After all, for him, the news was probably a great relief as his secret crimes are safe, and he could now have Uriah's wife 24/7 as his own.

We quickly and gladly hear that the Lord is displeased with David, and Nathan, God's prophet, has been dispatched to the palace. Nathan proceeds to tell David what could be called an Old Testament parable about a rich man and a poor man. David is rightly incensed when he hears that the rich man with many flocks takes the poor man's only pet ewe lamb and has it killed and prepared for a visitor's meal. Nathan then springs his trap by accusing David of being just like the wicked, uncaring and heartless rich man. "King David, you are that man!"

After Nathan speaks for the Lord, recalling all God has done for David, reviewing David's malice and doling out David's punishment, David knows that Nathan is right. He is the man in the parable and worse still.

In David's favor, when accused, he doesn't plead innocent. He doesn't start blaming someone else. And he doesn't start making excuses for his illicit behavior. David owns up to his reprehensible conduct. "David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the Lord.'"

Whether an infraction is minor or horrendous, it is rare for the accused to just simply say, "You are right, I did it. I am guilty, and I take full responsibility for my actions."

Most the time our first reaction is to go immediately on the defensive. We can rationalize all sorts of reasons to justify our bad behavior. How many of us believe that we have led ideal, upright lives? If God were to shine his perfect light on the entirety of our days and years, we would all have some explaining to do, I suspect. Rather than explain, the church highly recommends confession or owning up to our failings and fallings. Then as the Psalmist writes this morning, we can feel clean and pure and have the joy of God's saving help again.

Sin has many faces, but one extreme form is to think we are no good whatsoever. I am a bad person, unlovable, and certainly unforgivable. God could never be pleased with me. Poor me!

The other extreme is just the opposite – I am God's gift to the world. I can do no wrong and, therefore, wouldn't ever need forgiveness. Everyone should learn from me. I am the greatest! (I think we all know a presidential hopeful who seems to believe that about himself.)

Neither of these extremes is preferable or true. In both cases, the person is greatly deceived. I believe, and I know you agree, that most of us live somewhere between these two extremes. You might say we know ourselves to be forgiven saints or beloved sinners. We make mistakes of all kinds and yet are always welcomed back into God's good graces. The good news wouldn't be good at all if we were loved only because we always did the right thing. We are all indebted to God's merciful loving-kindness and therefore glad indeed.

King David has acted in the most abominable way, and yet in the very next verse after today's reading, after David has confessed his sin, we hear, "And Nathan said to David, 'The Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die.'"

We're flabbergasted. No sooner has David fessed up than God immediately forgives him. Is God's forgiveness always so swift, and can we count on it? St. Paul wrote, "...that Jesus died for us while we were yet sinners." (Romans 5:8) And Jesus said in Luke's gospel, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," as he was being nailed to the cross. (Luke 23:24) These

verses would suggest the answer is a definite yes. We are forgiven by God well before we sin. God's grace always precedes us.

David doesn't get off scot-free, however, because he has confessed. David and Bathsheba's baby will die, and David's sons will wrangle over the throne after David's death so that within one generation, David's united kingdom will be divided, weakened and eventually conquered.

Sin always has intended and unintended consequences to the sinner and other oftentimes innocent victims. Some notorious sinners need to be kept from the public for their sakes and that of others, but that doesn't mean they are beyond forgiveness any more than the rest of us.

King David retains his elevated status in Jewish history not because he was an enlightened despot all the time, but because he did a lot of great good, and in the face of his transgression, he was man enough to humble himself before the Lord and take his licks.

Every day, like King David all those years ago, we display our devotion to our God through our thoughts, our words and our actions. If we can be candid with ourselves, in light of Christ's teachings, we are hardly ever flawless, are we? We depend daily on God's grace just as much as we depend on our daily bread to keep us upright and moving forward. John's gospel calls this grace, love and forgiveness from Jesus "the bread of life."

"Jesus, give us this bread always." AMEN.