

Sermon
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Amy Foster
June 12, 2016

2 Samuel 11:26 – 12:10, 13-15
Psalm 32
Luke 7:36 – 8:3

From today's collect: “may we proclaim your truth with boldness, and minister your justice with compassion.”

Last winter in the Adult Forum, we read together a fictionalized version of the story of King David. The book is titled *The Secret Chord*, alluding to David's musical talent and his ability to play music to soothe and inspire both himself and others. And so, when Dee Anne realized that today's first lection focuses on David, she suggested it might be a good Sunday for me to preach. And how appropriate, too, that today is music Sunday—we celebrate our music program as we remember that ancient musician, David, who still inspires us today and whose psalms we continue to sing in our worship.

But, today's reading from 2 Samuel does not focus on David's music. In fact, it recounts a confrontation between David and his prophet Nathan that exposes David's failings. Let's remember the story that leads up to the passage we heard today. David, the king of Israel, has taken Bathsheba—another man's wife—and has gotten her pregnant. In order to cover up his misdeed, he calls Bathsheba's husband, Uriah the Hittite, back from battle in the hope that his presence at home will prevent speculation about the child's parentage. Upstanding soldier that he is, Uriah refuses to take comfort with his wife while his fellow soldiers are on the battlefield. David, his plan having failed, arranges to have Uriah killed in battle, and that's where the story picks up in today's passage. David brings Bathsheba to his household when her time of mourning for her husband has ended, and she bears their son.

David has really made a mess of things, and he has compounded his initial violation with the arranged murder of Uriah. In the novel, *The Secret Chord*, this set of events is identified as a turning point in the relationship between David and his prophet Nathan. Nathan had observed David's appetites and his violence in the past, but Nathan had always felt that David was doing what was necessary for the survival of Israel. This, though, is different. There is nothing about this incident that can be justified, and Nathan stands up to David to let him know. In both the novel and the biblical account, Nathan confronts David cleverly, by telling the story of a rich man who takes a poor man's only, beloved ewe lamb from him. David, true to form with his passion and his temper, immediately condemns the rich man, only to have Nathan reveal that the story really represents David's own actions. Wow—Nathan really hits David with the truth. He lets David know that he has crossed the line, despite all that God has done for him. Nathan takes a risk in condemning the king of Israel, but his willingness to speak truth to power, to “proclaim truth with boldness,” as our collect said today, is inspiring.

But today, I would like to consider another aspect of this confrontation—David’s rush to judgment about the rich man in Nathan’s story. The biblical passage says that after Nathan tells the story, “David’s anger was kindled greatly against the man,” and he tells Nathan that the man deserves to die. Now, even for David’s time, that’s a pretty harsh punishment for taking someone’s lamb. And when he expresses his outrage, David cannot even see that he himself has been equally—in fact, much more—sinful. And what a reminder this is for us. How often do we judge others, quickly condemning their actions, without first recognizing our own faults—faults that may not be so different from those we are condemning in others? In reflecting on this aspect of today’s passage, I couldn’t help but think of the recent unfortunate incident with the gorilla at the Cincinnati Zoo. In the aftermath of this tragedy, social media was filled with people judging the young boy’s mother and second guessing the actions of zoo officials. People made incredibly harsh and hurtful comments about the parenting skills of the mother, sometimes proposing outrageous responses wildly out of proportion to the incident. These were people, of course, who hadn’t even been there, who didn’t know which of this woman’s other children might have caught her attention just long enough for the four-year old to wander off. Those of us who are parents or who have cared for young children can likely remember moments when we were distracted, when our young children snuck out of sight, when we couldn’t control every movement of a preschooler. Before we rush to judgment about this incident or any other we might encounter, perhaps we should slow down and be willing to look more closely at our own experiences and our own faults, just as Nathan forced David to do.

Today’s touching gospel story also reminds us not to be so quick to judge and reveals the forgiving nature of God that can both comfort and instruct us. Jesus’ acceptance of the woman—identified as a sinner—who humbly bathes and anoints his feet, as well as his criticism of the Pharisee who confronts him, reminds us to be more like Jesus. To be loving and forgiving, not judgmental. To accept those who acknowledge their own sins, as the woman is clearly doing in her tearful service of Jesus. In the story, Jesus shows compassion—he realizes that the woman has recognized her own sin and is remorseful, and he rebukes the Pharisee who judges her (and who even judges Jesus) too harshly.

There are times when we need to follow the example of Nathan, to speak boldly in the face of injustice, proclaiming the truth even when it might be risky. But we also need to remember there are many times we should take a closer look at ourselves before we jump to judgment about others. In acknowledging our own shortcomings, as the woman who humbled herself before Jesus did and as David eventually did, we may develop more empathy and compassion for others as we seek to make things right in the world. In the words of today’s collect, we can “minister justice with compassion.” God does this for us—the least we can do is try to do it for each other.