

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Bill White



June 13, 2010 – Pentecost 3

Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

The Sermon Text — 2 Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13-15

When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord, and the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, 'There were two men in a certain city, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meagre fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveller to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.' Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, 'As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.'

Nathan said to David, 'You are the man! Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.... David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the Lord.' Nathan said to David, 'Now the Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child that is born to you shall die.' Then Nathan went to his house.

Luke 7:36—8:3

One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.' Jesus spoke up and said to him, 'Simon, I have something to say to you.' 'Teacher,' he replied, 'speak.' 'A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?' Simon answered, 'I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.' And Jesus said to him, 'You have judged rightly.' Then turning towards the woman, he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I

came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment.

Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.' Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven.' But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, 'Who is this who even forgives sins?' And he said to the woman, 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace.' Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

SERMON

Do you like rags to riches stories, stories of poor kids who work their way to the top, people who start on the lower rung of life and end up being CEOs, Generals, Presidents or Kings? If the answer is yes, you will like the one we have today. It may be one of the best bottom to top stories ever told...and it is true. It is the story of David, the shepherd boy, the youngest son of Jesse. It is a made for TV kind of tale.

David first appears in the Bible as a musician. He was the guitar playing lad who was brought in to play soothing ballads to help King Saul, who suffered from depression, sleep at night. David was both a musician and an athlete, a boy who could sing, and a master with a sling shot, which he used to keep the wild animals away from his flock.

One day the shepherd boy, too young to be a soldier, brought food to his brothers who were fighting a war vs. the Philistines. While he was in the army camp he heard the giant Philistine Goliath, who was said to stand 9'9" (or if you prefer the King James version, 6 cubits and a span) and covered with metal, belittling not only the army of Israel, but Israel's God. Goliath challenged the soldiers to fight man to man. No one dared face the giant, so David, who fought for the honor of God and country, took his sling shot and felled Goliath with one smooth stone.

King Saul was thrilled and honored David by offering him the hand of his daughter, the princess. David accepted. Not long after David was appointed an officer in the king's army. He was so successful that people chanted his name as he returned from battle – Saul has killed thousands, but David ten thousands. David was a hero, but the competition didn't please the king.

David's story has many twists and turns but eventually he became king. He was not just any king, but Israel's greatest king, presiding over Israel's Golden Age. The arts flourished, and David was, as his name suggests, beloved. He did the big things, expanding the country and making it secure, and still had time for the little things, caring for the crippled son of a deceased friend, and sharing wealth with his personal troops. David also had, as custom allowed, many wives. For a time he still led his army into battle, but then things began to change.

Chapter 11 begins, “In the spring of the year. The time when kings go forth to battle, David sent Joab (his main general) and his servants with him...but David remained in Jerusalem.”

One day King David walked on his roof that overlooked the city and he saw Bathsheba, a beautiful woman bathing. He asked about her and found that she was the wife of one of his soldiers, Uriah, a Hittite convert. David sent for Bathsheba and slept with her. Soon she announced that she was pregnant.

Both Bathsheba and David were fearful for adultery was punishable by death in those days. David’s Plan A was to bring Uriah back from the front to spend time with his wife, and to give the appearance that he was the father of her child. Uriah, however, was an honorable man and obeyed the code that disallowed officers from sleeping with their wives during a war. So David had to go to plan B, which was to put Uriah in battle where the fighting was most fierce and trust that he would die. This plan was successful.

When Uriah died Bathsheba began the required time of mourning. When that time had passed David sent for her, married her and she gave birth to a son. It appeared as if the king had dodged a bullet.

I wouldn’t be surprised if you are saying, this story sounds very familiar. Unfortunately it is. If I replaced the name David with John Edwards, Gov. Eliot Spitzer, Gov. Mark Sanford, Tiger Woods, Ben Roethlisberger or Bill Clinton you would say, “I’ve heard all of this before.”

Let’s be clear, this is not a story about sex; it is primarily a story about power. It is about a man who used his position to get what he wanted, though it was not in his or anyone’s best interest to do so. Reading the story we remember the words of Lord Acton, “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” I’m told that former president Clinton explained his affair with Monica Lewinski this way, “I did it because I could.”

Not everyone uses power for sexual favors. Others use power for wealth, or to impose ideology. Bernie Madoff may be one case, or anyone of a number of foreign dictators --Manuel Noriega, Idi Ami, Charles Taylor.

All of these are examples of destructive behavior. What is needed for such behavior to end? Usually the bottom has to fall out, or there needs to be a conversion. In David’s case it started with this statement, “But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD.” David was a religious man who had lost his way. He needed a day of reckoning, an intervention, to help him see what he had refused to see.

David’s eyes were opened when Nathan the prophet told him a story, “There were two men who lived next to each other, one rich, the other poor. The rich man had many sheep, the poor man had one pet lamb that he fed from his table. When the rich man had company he took the poor man’s lamb and butchered it for his meal.

David’s anger flared and he said, “As the LORD lives that man deserves to die.”

Nathan said to David, “You are that man! Why have you despised the word of the LORD to do what is evil in his sight?”

Many people have been confronted with the truth and immediately gone into denial. Many have lied, adding another sin to the one they have already committed. Such behavior

prevents change and healing. To his credit, David immediately confessed, saying “I have sinned against the Lord.”

His confession did not spare him from punishment. Sin always has social implications. David’s family life was a mess in the years that followed, but David again became a good, kind and godly king.

Ben Roethlisberger, whose nickname is “Big Ben,” is big in several ways. He is 6’5”, 240 pounds. That is big. He is the youngest player to quarterback a Super Bowl winner. That is big. Unfortunately, he has been in trouble three different times including a nearly fatal motorcycle accident in 2006, sexual assault allegations in 2008, and another earlier this year, and that too is big.

This week he confessed that being “Big Ben” wasn’t serving him well. “At the time, I didn’t see it. I was gaining everything but I was losing a lot of who I was raised to be. It got so overwhelming. It consumed me.” He promised he would not go back to being the ego-driven, rude and boorish person he was before (his words).

There were not religious overtones to Big Ben’s confession, just an admission that he has been acting like a jerk. Good for him. Anytime people turn a corner and act in a decent manner we all win.

But at times the people who get into this behavior are, or confess to be, people of faith. Bill Clinton comes to mind, as does Enron Chairman Kenneth Lay. People of faith are called to a different level of behavior. David was such a man and when he crossed the boundary he broke God’s heart. “Why?” God asked. “After all I’ve done for you. If you only asked I am willing to do more. Why have you despised the word of the LORD?”

When I disobeyed my father it was not the punishment I dreaded, but his displeasure. “Why, Bill, why? You know better. I expect more from you. You are breaking my heart.”

When I heard those words my heart broke. The one time my son got into difficulty at school he had one request: Please, don’t tell my dad. He wasn’t afraid of punishment, but of my disappointment.

I once asked a man who confessed to a series of adulterous acts, a man who was frequently in church, to explain it. He said, “I can’t. I got too big. I forgot who I was.”

David forgot who he was. So did John Edwards, and Eliot Spitzer, and Ben Roethlisberger.

My friends, remember who you are. “You have been sealed with the Holy Spirit, and marked with the cross of Christ forever.” You are a son or a daughter of the king. You represent your heavenly father. Look at yourselves and what you do through the prism of God. If you are committing behavior that is destructive for you or anyone else, particularly those you love, remember: “If we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” It is one of the greatest promises ever made, and it is true. Amen. © 2010