

Sermon for July 26, 2015 (Proper 12, Year B)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: 2 Samuel 11:1-17; John 6:1-21

Know what: health in life depends on meaning, purpose, identity

So what: lack of these leads to addictions, ruptures in community

Now what: in the body of Christ, God provides meaning and purpose for all

Title: David Rose From His Couch

King David reminds me of Bill Cosby. Oh yes. I am sorry to say it.

Men with money and fame and power taking advantage of women to fulfill their own personal needs.

This is such a horrible episode in the midst of a story that, generally, extols the glorious height of Israel's power. Never before – or since – have the Hebrew people had such economic and political power as they did under David and his son Solomon.

And yet, right in the midst of this triumphal history, is this horrible tale of rape, deception, collusion, and murder.

Before we dissect this event and what it means for us today, allow me to point out to you how remarkably rare and unusual it is for an ancient historical text such as this to present this story in such an objective and unfavorable light.

Remember that the ones of who write history are generally those who win the battles? Well, David won the battles. He was the King par excellence! He was the national hero. He is the One to whom the LORD had sworn a divine oath to establish his house for ever.

Ancient histories such as this ALWAYS lauded the people's hero.

The Bible, however, handles people like David quite differently. There is a serious attempt made to show that all of these "heros" – Abraham and Sarah, Moses, David and his successor Solomon – that they are ordinary, fallible human beings.

There is no attempt to paper over the extent of David's wretched sin.

It is all here, and it is horrible.

He was a great man, described as “a man after God’s own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14), but he had a clear weakness in matters of the flesh – an addictive obsession which his son Solomon developed as well.

I heard a fascinating report this week about one recent study of addiction. This report suggests that the common story told about addiction is simply not true.

For the last century, our society has told us that people become addicted because of chemical hooks latent in our brains.

That is, if all of us take certain illicit substances for a number of days, then most of us will become addicted because our brains will have become hooked to these chemical agents. Our brains will then demand and direct us to continue using these substances and so we will become addicts. This is the general explanation.

However, very simply, this is not factually accurate.

This story or explanation was based upon famous studies done on rats by B.F. Skinner at Harvard in the 1930’s. In these experiments, rats were placed in a now famous “Skinner Box” - a small, empty box where they were given access to two types of water bottles: one held ordinary tap water, and the other contained water laced with cocaine or heroin.

In nearly every case, when confined in a Skinner box, a rat takes the drug-laced water to the point of overdose or death. This simple experiment gave birth to our common story of addiction: once a mammal starts, they cannot stop until overdose or death.

Other scientists questioned these results, however. One named Dr. Bruce Alexander built something different for his experiments. He built a housing unit for rats called Rat Park. There was plenty of food, lots of balls and fun games for the rats to play, other rats with which to interact and start families, and places where they could build comfortable nests.

AND at the same time, these rats were also given access to the two kinds of water: ordinary and laced.

Guess what? In Rat Park, the rats spurn the drug-laced water. Most of them never even touch it. The few that do never abuse it to the point of excess.

The addiction rate between these studies of rats changed from 100% to 0%. Now, what is the primary difference? Not the chemical agents. Not any so-called hooks in the brain.

The different is in their social environment.

Rats, like humans, are social creatures. Both they and us need things to do, others to relate to, relationships to build and maintain.

When those conditions are present in sufficient amount, addiction becomes a non-factor.

Did you notice how this story of David's despicable episode with Bathsheba began?

"In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him..." (2 Samuel 11:1)

David's closest friends and ALL ISRAEL went out to fight against their enemies...while David – the King! – stayed home and took a nap on his comfortable couch on his rooftop terrace.

Now, just think for a moment about what we have learned about David up until this part of his story. As a boy, he was responsible for his family's herd of sheep. For years, David was out with the sheep in the fields, fighting off attacks from lions and bears.

Then he fought and defeated Goliath. After this, he became embroiled in a years-long conflict with Saul, who was then the king.

Finally, David gained control over the tribes of Israel and he consolidated his power by defeating the enemies of his people in battle.

Do you see? David's entire life was one of action and battle, comradery with fellow soldiers, strategic planning, successful adventures, exciting drama!

But now, he sent Joab and everyone else to go and take care of the battles, while he stayed at home and took a nice little nap.

Considering this history and these circumstances, is it difficult to understand HOW or WHY David got himself into such a boatload of trouble?

What changed? His entire social environment changed. He lost his friends, his fellow warriors. He lost his sense of purpose and adventure.

Now, he stayed in his little box called the Royal Palace and he had access to two kinds of refreshment: the ordinary kind, and the dangerous kind.

Is it that surprising that he chose the dangerous path? Disappointing? Yes. Repulsive? Yes. Surprising? I think not.

Now, to be entirely clear, let's make sure that there is not any doubt about Bathsheba's innocence in this matter. The Torah requires a woman to bathe after her menstrual period. In Hebrew tradition, this is done in a mikvah, which is a public bath, and it is required that this washing is done entirely naked by means of full immersion. Bathsheba was doing her religious duty. Nowhere in the text is there ever even a hint of shame directed toward her.

In fact, there's an old tale in the Jewish midrash which explains that Bathsheba was so modest, that she was holding a bucket over her head to cover herself from any possible onlookers.

However, David was aimlessly walking his roof at this time when a bird flew by. The rabbis explain that this bird was Satan's device to entice David.

David, with nothing else to do, thoughtlessly fired an arrow at the bird. But he missed the mark. Instead, the arrow made a direct hit on the bucket which Bathsheba was holding, forcing it to split in two, and thus revealing her fully to his gaze.

Boredom, lack of purpose, lack of meaning, dissatisfaction with your life – we are beginning to understand that these are the things which lead to addictive behaviors. And this is precisely what we see in this tragic episode in David's life.

The good news, my friends, is that life as a disciple of Jesus has the potential for an amazing amount of purpose, meaning, connections and hope.

Remember, please, that there is no such thing as Christianity. That is an empty idea. Jesus did not leave the world with a set of principles and concepts. He created a living community of people which continues to this very day.

God's intention for you is to have meaning and purpose in your life by connecting with other real human beings to accomplish things that have lasting impact.

What you DO NOT WANT is to end up like my anti-social neighbor who lives next to our cabin in New Hampshire. He and his wife live alone and isolated year-round on our dead-end dirt road. It's like one of Skinner's boxes. He hates me, sorry to say, so we don't really talk. But he does not seem to work – ever! Do you know what he does everyday when there is no snow? He uses his gas-powered leaf-blower to blow every single leaf out of his yard.

Now, friends, this place is deep in the woods of New Hampshire. Our road is surrounded by nearly 8000 acres of state forest and conservations lands.

8000 acres of forest! That's a lot of leaves. My neighbor there has a purpose in life alright - to battle the onslaught of leaves which continuously try to fill his little yard!

THIS, my friends, is what happens when you are NOT connected to the Church! When you are NOT engaged in the work of the kingdom of God!

I cannot say exactly how you are called to engage with God's work in the world, but I know without any doubt that God has work for you to do – tasks that bring meaning and purpose into your life as you connect with others to bring healing and hope into this world. This is how we are created to live. Why then would you ever be like David in this story? Why settle for a boring, disconnected life without purpose? Why not rather join our Lord Jesus Christ in his ongoing work of feeding, teaching and healing humanity?