

Sermon for August 2, 2015 (Proper 13, Year B)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: 2 Samuel 11:26-12:15; John 6:24-35

Know what:

So what:

Now what:

Title:

A wise old saint once described his life in this way:

“When I was a young man, I was a revolutionary! All my prayer to God was ‘Lord, give me the energy to change the world!’

When I entered middle age and realized that half my life was gone without my changing a single soul, I changed my prayer to ‘Lord, give me the grace to change all those who come into contact with me. Just my family and friends, and I shall be satisfied.’

And now that I am an old man and my days are numbered, my only prayer is this, ‘Lord, give me the grace to change myself.’ If only I had prayed this right from the start, then I would not have wasted my life”
(Anthony de Mello, The Song of the Bird, p. 153).

This week, my friends, we continue the saga which begins the demise of David and his family. Like this wise old saint, David needs to change himself, but he does not – or cannot – and the rest of his family must suffer the consequences.

Nathan, as a prophet of the royal court, is sent by God to confront and rebuke David. And he does – with a parable!

It’s remarkable how slow David is to pick up on the intended meaning of the parable.

In Hebrew, the name of the new wife in David’s royal harem is Bat-Sheva, which is the daughter of Sheva. Bat is the word for daughter.

In the parable, the prophet explains that the one little ewe lamb was like a daughter – like a Bat – to the poor man, and that even though the rich man had plenty already, he took this one like a Bat from the poor one.

It's as if Nathan is trying to make the point obvious, but David is stuck squarely in the mindset of self-justification. He does not even see the connection at this point.

So Nathan has to say it as plainly as possible. "You're the man!"
In this context, that's NOT a good thing!

David is the criminal. And he himself explains the punishment for these horrible crimes.

"As the LORD lives," he exclaimed to Nathan, "the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold" (2 Sam 12:5-6).

And this is how the story unfolds.

David's own life was spared – more on that in a moment – but, perhaps even worse than death itself, David would live to see the death of four of his own children: this first unnamed child of Bathsheba, and his sons Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah.

No parent should ever have to bury their own child. David did so four times.

Lord, have mercy.

But this is the future of his story. Look once more at the ending where Nathan explains the immediate sentence for the crimes committed.

"Now the LORD has put away your sin; you shall not die" (2 Sam 12:13).
Nevertheless, the child will die!

Thankfully, David did repent.

The parable of the prophet had its intended effect.

David was humble enough to be convicted of his error, his sin, his evil.

He repented and the prophet declared the reality of God's forgiveness for all who ask for it, to all who seek after it.

This is the first profound truth that we find in the conclusion of this story:
God forgives.

The forgiveness of God is never far away and it is never difficult to access.

David says just two words in Hebrew. "I have sinned against the LORD."
In Hebrew, those are two words! That's it!

Remember that he is the one who coveted his neighbor's wife, stole Bathsheba away, committed adultery, killed her faithful and noble husband through lies and deception, all while sacrificing the lives of his soldiers in a risky battle against a foreign city, and now – two little words – and he is pardoned?

Yes. This is truth. Forgiveness, on God's end, is never in question!
Nowhere in the Bible is there any statement which defines God as slow or reticent to forgive. Because that is false.
Forgiveness, mercy, grace are at the very core of who God is.

Nevertheless, there are always consequences to our actions, and no one is immune – whether king or peasant.

This is the SECOND profound truth that we find here in this story.

There is always a natural cause and effect in life.
And there are always consequences for each decision that we make.

Oh, let each person on earth understand this as perfectly and clearly as possible!

Our failures, our shortcomings, our inability to change ourselves has impact upon everyone around us.

I think that we need to name this together and be perfectly clear about it: the outcome in this case is horribly unfair!

David sinned, and the innocent child – who never even lived long enough to be given a name – this unnamed innocent is the one who must pay the price!

How could that possibly be considered fair or just? It is not. Not at all.

But it is a true story.

Because this is how life works, how family systems work.

When one person breaks vows, commitments, confidences, promises, then everyone around them suffers the consequences.

On this earth, we are all inter-connected. Everything that we do affects the rest of humanity. But this connected-ness becomes even more magnified within a family.

Gross dysfunction in one part of a family affects each and every member, like it or not. And this is especially true when it is the patriarch or the matriarch of the family who commits the crime.

It becomes manifest in someone. We call this the identified patient.

The identified patient carries the sickness of the family, but not because he or she deserves it. Rarely, if ever, can one understand why a certain one carries the pain and sickness of the family.

Last week, we spoke about some of the root causes of addiction, and how we can see addictive patterns of behavior in David and his successor, Solomon.

Last Sunday, the Washington Post also published an article about heroin addiction here in Falmouth and about the tragic death of David McCarthy in October.

If you have not yet read or watched that, please do so.

And this past week I learned that two of my own cousins in New Jersey are heroin addicts.

This scourge of addiction is heart-breaking and complex and frustrating.

I don't know too much about the McCarthy family, but in the case of my extended family, the large Ferrell clan down in New Jersey, I know that an entire book could be written about the many layers of dysfunction, abuse, lies and deception.

And to such actions there are always equal and opposite reactions.
Someone will bear the consequences and manifest the pain.

The late John Ciardi answered the question, "What are human beings?" in this way:
"We are what we do with our attention."

My friends, each one of us lives in a family system with some level of dysfunction.
It is the nature of our human existence.

But to live the healthy, abundant, Christ-centered life to which the Lord invites us,
we HAVE to pay attention to the family system in which we find ourselves.

We cannot escape it. We cannot run away from it. We have to face it – directly,
openly, honestly. We can only change the world by changing ourselves.

The good news, my friends, is that the grace of God abounds for all who seek
healing, wholeness, integrity, completeness by taking a good and honest look at
themselves and by being humble enough to change.

Barbara Brown Taylor said it this way: "Grace is the mysterious strength God
lends human beings who commit themselves to the work of
transformation" (Speaking of Sin, 2000: p. 85). Let me say that again. (REPEAT)

Will you – honestly and thoroughly – commit yourself to God's dream of
transformation? It always begins – as it must – right here (in the human heart).
May it be so. Amen.