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Sunday morning

Providence Baptist Church
Hendersonville, North Carolina

“Confession That Leads To Life”

II Samuel 11:26-12:13a; Psalm 51: 1-12

You have just won a pet rabbit. I'm making it a pet rabbit because I've never seen so many rabbits in all my life since I've been here. In Texas the only place you see a rabbit is in the pet store. You are waffling whether to name it Bobsy or Peter, ah, Cottontail. You begin to grow to love him and see him as one of the family. He eats meals with you, sits next to you at the dinner table, and you give him his apportioned carrot and lettuce every day. When you and the kids (or grandkids) sit down in the living room to play or watch TV, Cottontail is there with you, sitting on your lap, cuddling you, like it never loved anything more. You've grown so fond of Cottontail that you take it to rabbit shows (are there such a thing?), dress him up, and even take him out on Main Street using a leash (they makes those for rabbits you know). There's no place you don't go without him and the whole family cherishes him just as much as you do.

But one day, a rich land owner in Hendersonville comes by your house and tells you that an important prospect has come to Hendersonville. The rich man demands your rabbit, and goes home and has his butcher skin and cut it, then brings it to his chef to make rabbit stew. Now, let me not forget to tell you that this rich man has a whole colony of rabbits on his land. He raises sheep, cattle, rabbits, goats, and on and on. This is an outcry! An injustice. Unthinkable. Unimaginable. Insensible. But this is what he has done. Imagine the heartache, the loss, the grief, the one you considered as a son, was taken away. One of your closest friends.

Such is the parable that Carolyn read today in the book of 2 Samuel, after the story of David and Bathsheba. Nathan the prophet has just told David this story and he is outraged, and rightly so. “The man who did this deserves to die.” Funny, David doesn't make any connections. He just got immersed in the story. Stories have a way of doing that. I've done enough preaching to know, that whenever I get to a story, those who are sleeping begin to wake up. Beware; stories can be just as cutting.

So note Nathan's strategy: he was a cool, calm collected presence. And his method of confrontation? A subversive story. Non-direct. In one of Emily Dickinson's poems she says, “Tell the truth but tell it slant,” and then the final line,

“The Truth must dazzle gradually or every man be blind.” If it hits you between the eyes, you’ll be defensive, turn away, deny the truth, but like this story, it takes you in, and before you know it you’re mad at the rich man who’s taken this one, precious family member and slaughtered it mindlessly for a stranger. Now, you’re an outsider, looking in, not the perpetrator, you can see the situation objectively, and easily identify who the offender is. This is how David was drawn in. And then boom Nathan puts down the hammer, “You are the man.”

So what was David’s offense? Not only had he committed adultery with Bathsheba, but one sin had led to another. He was caught in a mess. The act of cover-up led him deeper down the briar patch, until he was so knee-deep in thorns of murder, and lies, that he was undone. As you may or may not remember, because Bathsheba conceived a child after their night of passion, he didn’t want people to know he was the baby’s daddy (which was hard to cover-up since the Bathsheba’s husband was at war—which is probably where David should have been.) So he brings Uriah back to try to persuade him ultimately to sleep with his wife. But being a devoted and loyal subject to his king and army, he is unwilling to have pleasure when his fellow soldiers are at war. David even tries to get him drunk and it backfires. So, now David’s in a huge dilemma. The only way to get rid of the problem, in his mind at the time of panic, was have Uriah put on the frontlines of war, so he is most likely killed, and put out of the picture. Of course, this is what happens, and then David takes Bathsheba as his wife at the proper time. David may have thought that he got away with it all, but you and I both know, that there’s no real “getting away with it.” Maybe you remember a story when you were little, perhaps the first time you lied or maybe even stole something, say from the grocery store. Do you remember that awful feeling when you finally got caught?

The Sovereign God knows all, of course, and sends Nathan to deliver a message. He says as I paraphrase, “I gave you everything David. I gave you the keys to the kingdom. I gave you victory over your adversary and made you king. I gave you the keenest pick of the litter of all you could want. The palace, the women, the power, the authority over all. And if this wasn’t enough, I would have given you more.” Nathan then declares the charge of his conviction: He despised the word of the Lord by doing what was evil in God’s eyes. His sentence: the sword will never depart from his children. This is the beginning of the downfall of David’s reign. He loses a son, and his children are at each other’s throats, and it’s one thing after enough: “incestuous rape, a murder of revenge, a son’s armed rebellion, and that son’s subsequent death.”¹

¹ Bruce C. Birch, “The First and Second Books of Samuel,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon

What I can't believe is that the whole time Nathan was telling his story, that David never catches on, that this offense of the one who had much and took the possession of one who had little, has any similarity to his own wrongdoing. He's clueless. And this is where I want to point out how far deep, down the dark rabbit hole David had gone. He had gained enough power, he was under the illusion that he could define the terms of morality. He had lost his moral compass, thinking that royal authority could even transcend divine authority. In a word, albeit a hyphenate word, he was self-deceived.

Isn't it interesting how those who point their finger the most, who raise their voices with the most vehemence (like David, when Nathan originally told the story) are usually the worst offenders of the same sin their outraged against. It doesn't take long to give a list of examples. Remember Ted Haggard from New Life Church in Colorado Springs. He raged against homosexual relationships, and then later got busted by one of his partners, did I mention homosexual, that confessed it to CNN. Or sad story, Marc Sanford, who was very pro-family values, and led out to *impeach* Clinton, and yet confessed to America that he has been having an affair with an Argentinean news anchor. I could go on with Eliot Spitzer, Enron, or many, many preachers or others in authority who speak out with such anger and invoking such fear on topics such as adultery, homosexuality, greed, gluttony, only to unveil the worst perpetrator of them all.

Why does this happen—because fear is one of the strongest human drivers. And when we recognize something evil in ourselves, and see it in someone else we rail against it. Beware of your own morality that is masquerading as fear. When we have a lot of energy and want to execute judgment around some injustice, we should ask ourselves the poignant question: Where is this energy coming from? Most of us are in denial about something. But how would we know it if we are— isn't that how denial works, it keeps it hidden, well into the subconscious.

I have a good friend who knows this well. He was always late for everything! Late to meetings, late to church, late to his job, and even late (or absent) when meeting us, his friends, for lunch. It would drive me crazy! He would say he was late because he struggled with time management. But over time (God was working on him!) he realized that the issue was not of time management but one of the heart. He was afraid to fail—fail at his job, fail in relationships. He realized he was self-sabotaging himself. How much better in his mind if someone else fired him for being late than for being a failure at his work. It took him a long time to

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realize that he had been deceiving himself and hurting himself too.

But there's one way to lift the veil of self-deception—confession. It truly is good for the soul.

Notice David's response after Nathan's decree of judgment, "I have sinned against the Lord." There is actually one psalm, 51, that has the superscription: "A Psalm of David. When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba." It is here that we get to fill in more of the story, seeing the more emotive and afflicted David, full of remorse as he states, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." And then those famous lines a few verses later--a call of repentance and desire for restoration, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence oh Lord, and take not thy holy spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of my salvation, and renew a right spirit within me."

In fact in many medieval synagogue manuscripts of 2 Samuel 12, a gap was left by the copyist following David's confession in verse 13a, to give opportunity for the reading of this very Psalm.² For it is powerful to see the man of guilt and repentance side by side.

The one who commits adultery, lies, and murder is the same one confessing, repenting, and crying out for reconciliation and leading a life "after God's own heart." "His confession reclaims the possibility of life for him." So does it for us—the community of believers. Both of these people lie within us. The rich man and the poor man. The exploiter and the exploited. The perpetrator and the victim. David the murderer and David the repentant and grieved. How do we stop the cycle of self-deception as individuals and in the church? We need the prophets in our life, spiritual directors, pastors and most importantly the Living Word. This is why the community of faith has been going back to the Bible for millennia. And we need to continue the discipline of confession, praying with a contrite heart. This is one reason so many denomination traditions have a time for confession in their liturgy (worship order) every week. To recognize our sins, "what we have done." And then my favorite part of the liturgy, "and by what we have left undone." Those sins that we don't even know about, those sins that we are in denial about, those sins that would never cross our radar. Like the parent who pushes their kid so hard to excel in school or in sports, only to reveal a heart afraid

² Birch, 1295.

of their own failure and insecurity. Or the person who is convinced that sharing news about others is helpful (or even in prayer requests), when in fact it is gossip. Or the married man or woman who says that their emails and conversations with this other man/woman are friendly, just needing a good friend, when in fact their heart is betraying their spouse. Or the person who keeps thinking they're a mistake or a failure, when the truth is they are made in the image of God. They are beautifully and wonderfully made.

So let our community be a place where Nathans and Davids stand side by side. Where truth and repentance abound. May this be a place for confession that leads to life.