

Sermon – A Gift

Scripture Lessons: II Samuel 11: 26 -12:13a; John 6:24-35

Sunday, August 5, 2018

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our first scripture reading is II Samuel 11:26-12:13a. It is the story of the prophet Nathan's confrontation with King David. As King, David also served as a judge so Nathan brings a matter before him for his discernment.... a story of gross injustice which outrages David. This "judicial parable" opens David's eyes to the outrage of his own behavior. Only after David sees his behavior for what it is does he confess his sin and seek forgiveness. However, his wrongdoing is not without consequences. One of these consequences, continuing the cycle of exploiting women, this time David's wives, is as difficult to understand and accept as is the culturally approved polygamy in this time and place. These things we do not understand; however, what we cannot deny is that sin does have consequences and those suffering the consequences are often the victims rather than the one committing the sin. This is the Word of God.

26 When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. 27 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, 12¹ and the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. 2 The rich man had very many flocks and herds; 3 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 meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. 4 Now there came a traveler 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." 5 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; 6 he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity." 7 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; 8 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. 9 Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in God's 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. 10 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. 11 Thus says the LORD: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. 12 For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun." 13 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."

Our second scripture reading is John 6:24-35. This passage follows last week's reading, the feeding of the 5000, which began with the gift of a young boy who shares his lunch. There is more than one way to interpret this miraculous feeding. Some see it as a miracle of Jesus multiplying the loaves and fishes. Others have difficulty reconciling this miracle with Jesus' refusal to turn the stones into loaves of bread during his temptations in the wilderness. It may

be that the miracle on the shores of the Sea of Galilee was the presence of Jesus who, through the gift of a small child, challenged a crowd of men and women “playing it safe” to risk in becoming a fellowship sharing resources. Perhaps the miracle of this story is not the changing of loaves and fishes but of changing men and women who seek Jesus, the bread of life, in Capernaum. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

24 So when the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum looking for Jesus. 25 When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” 26 Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. 27 Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set God’s seal.” 28 Then they said to him, “What must we do to perform the works of God?” 29 Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom God has sent.” 30 So they said to him, “What sign are you going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe you? What work are you performing? 31 Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” 32 Then Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. 33 For the bread of God is that which^[a] comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” 34 They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.” 35 Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. Amen.

The title of the sermon: “A Gift”

The text: Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man.... Nathan said to David, “You are the man’...” II Samuel 12; 5a,7a

Let us pray: For opportunities to see ourselves more clearly and for people who are willing to confront us lovingly, we give you thanks, dear God. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen

According to Presbyterian minister and theologian Frederick Buechner in his book Peculiar Treasures:

Just about every king seems to have had a prophet to be a thorn in his flesh and to help keep him honest. Saul had Samuel, Ahab had Elijah, Hezekiah had Isaiah... and so on. King David was the one who had Nathan. There is nothing of Nathan’s in writing so it is impossible to grade him on literary skill, but when it comes to the ability to stick the stiletto in with maximum efficiency, he gets a straight A. _David had successfully gotten rid of Uriah, the Hittite by assigning him to front line duty where he was soon picked off by enemy snipers. After a suitable period of mourning, David then proceeded to marry Uriah’s gorgeous young widow, Bathsheba. The honeymoon had hardly started rolling, before Nathan came around to describe a hardship case the thought David might want to do something about.” When Nathan finished, David hit the roof. He said anybody who’d pull a stunt like that ought to be taken out and shot. And who was the greedy, thieving slob, anyway, he wanted to know. Take a look in the mirror the next time you’re near one,” Nathan said. It was only the beginning.

Today, I invite us to take a closer look at Nathan, who was God’s gift to David. He was “a gift” because he kept David honest and helped him see himself more clearly. The name Nathan means

“a gift or given by God.” Nathan was the only one who had the courage to confront a very powerful man who surely needed to be confronted about his ethical and moral breach. It took courage and it took love. Nathan cared enough about David and the Israelite people to confront the king, and because he knew how delicate the situation was he choose an unsettling allegory. As the Interpreters Bible Commentary put it: “...a master piece of pathos and power which ranks with the parables of Jesus is an effective instrument to disturb the conscience.”

David saw very clearly in the rich man of the parable what he was totally blind to within himself: One human being exploiting another. How many of us have had a similar self-righteous response to situations outside our own? It is so easy to become outraged by injustices that do not directly concern our security and position. The folly of our self-righteous rage, like David’s, is that we simultaneously participate in exploitation which springs from blind devotion to our own – whether it’s our own families, our own class, our own race, our own nation, our own religion, or simply our own self-esteem.

Nathan, by confronting David, gives him another chance, an opportunity to see himself more clearly and if he chooses, to acknowledge his shortcomings and to ask for forgiveness. Ancient Israel, for whatever reason, had a profound understanding of human nature. They recognized the importance of telling one’s own story – acknowledging and taking responsibility for wrong doings along the way. The psalms are full of such personal and private confessions. Nothing can be more harmful to a person’s mental and physical health than untold secrets which grow larger than life in the dark closets of one’s mind. Without an opportunity to acknowledge and confess sin, there is no possibility for forgiveness.

The gift Nathan offers David is to help him get in touch with his own story. When David sees himself for who he is through Nathan’s eyes, he is equally outraged. He acknowledges his sin and seeks forgiveness. Without confession, there is no forgiveness. Without taking responsibility for what has gone array in our lives, there is no opportunity to change, to grow, to make amends– or as Nathan might say – to repent!

The story of the feeding of the five thousand in John’s gospel, although much less outrageous, has some parallels. When those gathered to hear Jesus preach see the young boy give his small, ordinary lunch to Jesus, perhaps they felt inspired to share their own lunches. As such, the spontaneous sharing of this little boy became a gift, “a Nathan” in the lives of the people that day.

Who are the Nathans in our lives? Who loves us enough to confront us with our own biases and prejudices or to inspire us to be better? Is it a prophet or a child? Could it be a spouse, a friend, our church, a book, a documentary?

Recently Peter and I received the gift of “a Nathan” in the form of a film our friend Alan Wallace lent us. The 2004 HBO film “Something the Lord Made” tells the story of the partnership between renown heart surgeon Dr. Alfred Blalock and his African American lab technician Mr. Vivian Thomas which began in Nashville in 1930 when Dr. Blalock hired Thomas to work at his Vanderbilt University lab. He expected Thomas to perform janitorial work until he discovered his remarkable dexterity and intellectual acumen. Thomas rapidly becomes an indispensable research partner to Blalock in his ventures into heart surgery.

The film traces their move in 1943 to Johns Hopkins Medical School, an institution where the only black employees are janitors and where Thomas must enter by the back door. When Dr.

Helen Taussig, the pediatric cardiologist at Hopkins challenges Blalock to come up with the surgical solution for her Blue Babies, Blalock and Thomas' collaboration in the lab over the years culminates in a successful procedure. Blalock praises Thomas' surgical skill as being "like something the Lord made" and insists that Thomas coach him through the first Blue Baby surgery over the protests of Hopkins' administrators.

Because of the racial prejudice of the time, and the academic custom which precludes mention of non-degreed lab assistants, Thomas received no recognition for his invaluable contributions. He was prohibited from attending the ceremony where Blalock is honored because it was held in the segregated Belvedere Hotel. The racial divide and segregation within our country had devastating effects on the friendship and collaboration between these two gifted men.

As we watched something the Lord made, Peter and I felt a deep remorse for the racism and segregation that are a part of our American story and our participation in it. The film concludes with an act of redemption which took place in 1976 when Johns Hopkins formally recognizes Thomas' work, awards him an honorary doctorate, and places his portrait on the wall next to the portrait of Dr. Blalock.

As I met with Dr. Roland and Hazen Folsie a few weeks ago in their home to welcome them into the life of our congregation, I mentioned this story to him because I knew he studied at Johns Hopkins before joining the SIU School of Medicine in 1971 to pioneer and build the medical school and the Department of Surgery. I asked him if he knew of Vivian Thomas to which he replied, "He taught me how to do surgery."

Thank God for the Nathan's in our lives. Let us treat them with respect even when their message is painful, for without them, we lose sight of ourselves and our need for God. When we lose this, we have lost everything. And let us pray for the Nathan's that have access to the kings and leaders in our world today to keep them accountable.

"The Lord sent the gift of Nathan to David..." Thanks be to God. Amen.