

THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Year C, Lectionary 11

June 13, 2010

2 Samuel 11:26—12:10, 13-15

Luke 7:36—8:3

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There is hardly a story in the Bible more distasteful than that of King David and his adulterous and murderous affair with Bathsheba. It needs to be said at the outset that Bathsheba is a pawn of the king in the story; there is no way she can be made out to be guilty, unless we heap guilt on victims, which happens all too often in our world.

David is king. He can have anything he wants. He has wealth, power, servants, and wives. Yet he wants more. He wants another man's wife. While others are fighting his bloody battles for him, even Bathsheba's faithful husband, from high up in his palace, David sees Bathsheba bathing on a rooftop below. He wants her, he sends for her, and he has her. When you're a king, you can have anything you want.

We don't know how long this abuse goes on—it goes on long enough for a child to be conceived. In an attempt to cover up his complicity, David orders Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, back from the battle. He feeds him, gets him drunk, and sends him off to his wife's bed.

But Uriah proves more honorable than David imagined, perhaps because David could not see past his own weakness and could not conceive of a man with integrity. Uriah refuses the pleasure and comfort of his wife's bed while his fellow soldiers are being deprived of the same privilege. Uriah sleeps in the doorway of the palace, on the ground.

Uriah has unknowingly, unwittingly, innocently foils David's plan. There would be no way the illicit pregnancy could be ascribed to Uriah. David's adultery turns murderous.

How often in life does one misdeed, whether by design or by default, lead to even greater sin? We are shocked when a drunken driving accident with a seriously injured passenger leads the driver to find ways to evade consequences, implicating his father in the process, and further endangering the life of his passenger. We wonder how an after midnight robbery of a young man's wallet and cell phone can lead to relentless beating with traumatic brain injury. How often in life does one misdeed, whether by design or by default, lead to even greater sin?

David's adultery turns murderous. When Uriah foils David's scheme to cover up the paternal parentage of the unborn child, David sends Uriah back into battle, to the front lines, where he knows that Uriah will surely die. When Uriah does die, David takes Bathsheba for his wife. Now, he thinks to himself, the child will be legitimate and his honor untarnished. When you're a king, you can have anything you want.

But God has something to say to David. God sends the prophet Nathan, who tells David a story intended to trap David into pronouncing his own sentence, his own judgment.

A rich man has many flocks and many, many lambs. A poor man has only one lamb, beloved to the man, who raised the lamb from birth. When the rich man receives a guest, he declines to take

one of his own lambs to feed his guest; rather, he takes the one and only lamb, the beloved, from the poor man, who has nothing else in the world.

King David, believing the story to be true, pronounces judgment on the rich man: He must die! Nathan closes the trap on the king: "You are the man."

God has something to say to David. In the same way, Jesus has something to say to Simon, the Pharisee. How often does God have something to say to the world through us, as individual Christians, and through the church at large?

Jesus has something to say to his host, Simon the Pharisee. Jesus tells Simon a story, also intended to trap Simon into seeing his sin.

A creditor has two debtors. One owes the value of 500 days' wages, the other 50 days' wages. Neither can pay, so the creditor cancels the debts of both. Which debtor will love the creditor more? "The one for whom he canceled the greater debt," Simon replies.

The greater the indebtedness, the greater the gratitude. The woman, considered a sinner, shows deep love and gratitude, while Simon shows none. Simon did not offer water to bathe Jesus' feet; the woman bathes his feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. Simon gave Jesus no kiss; the woman does not stop kissing Jesus' feet. Simon did not anoint Jesus' head with oil; the woman anoints Jesus' feet with the ointment. Where Simon has failed in his obligations as host, the woman has excelled. With respect to hospitality, Simon proves himself to be the greater sinner. So the sinner, who is Simon, dares to say 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."

It is easy for us to find fault with David and with Simon in our readings for today. It is difficult to see ourselves in them, however. I wonder if the more extreme the sin, the more egregious the wrong, the more scandalous the deceit, the less likely we are to see ourselves.

Sometimes it is helpful to place ourselves in the story. Let's look at our gospel. There are three characters: Simon the Pharisee, the woman who is a sinner, and Jesus. It would be presumptuous to identify ourselves with Jesus. That leaves Simon and the woman. Regardless of which character we choose, we are the sinner. If we identify with the woman, we go to Jesus with our sin and show our gratitude to him, knowing his love and forgiveness. If we identify with Simon, we are self-righteous and proud, refusing to acknowledge our sin. There are no other characters; there are no other options. Either we are the woman or we are Simon. The difference is that the woman knows her need of Jesus and Simon does not. It could be argued, by Simon's failure to offer hospitality and his self-righteousness, that he is the greater sinner, if sin is to be counted and somehow rated as greater or lesser.

The truth is that we are all the debtors in the parable of the creditor and the two debtors. It doesn't much matter to God whether we are the greater or the lesser of the debtors; we are all offered forgiveness.

Now all that is left for us to do is to live our lives in gratitude.

Thanks be to God!