

“Ewe Turn”

11th Sunday of Ordinary Time

2 Samuel 12:7–10, 13

Psalm 32:1–2, 5, 7, 11

Galatians 2:16, 19–21

Luke 7:36–50

He made an abrupt U-turn on Easy Street. His applegart of greed was overturned. Maybelline makeup could not mask the portrait of guilt sketched on his face. His gut growled with the gruff voice of self-loathing. Portrait of a bad shepherd whose blackest sheep was his own soul. Portrait of a thief who had discovered his own hand caught in the cookie jar.

His soul had been awakened by the still small voice of Nathan. Nathan had long been a faithful servant of David. Nathan was also a faithful disciple of God. Nathan knew that God’s covenant of love with David had been broken. David had murdered his lieutenant Uriah so he could have the soldier’s wife Bathsheba for his own. Bathsheba, with whom he had already committed adultery. Bathsheba, already carrying David’s child. A child who would not live.

This is such an important story because it tells us what can happen to the heart of a godly man when he opens himself up to the evil one, thus allowing the devil to wrench ever tighter the vice grip of mortal sin and so suffocate grace and virtue.

David, we are told, earlier in his life story was a man after God’s own heart. And that was the thing about David the young man, he had a heart of gold. He was trusting and obedient, loyal to Saul even when the King wanted his courtier and musician killed. David’s loyalty to Saul’s son Jonathan is one of the most moving stories of friendship in the Bible. With time, David came to ascend the throne. At first things went well because he led with virtue. But then as the years passed and he amassed increasing power and his country came to the place of military dominance in the region, he was increasingly proud and one spring day this pride, couple with greed and envy gripped his heart.

At the time of the year when kings usually went to war, David decided to stay home. He was complacent and lazy to the point that one afternoon he took a nap that lasted so long he didn’t rise til evening. Upon rising he went up onto his roof where he spied the young woman Bathsheba bathing on the opposite roof. Rather than taking custody of his eyes he intensified his gaze so that now his heart was lustful and covetous. He was envious and wanted Bathsheba for own. St Augustine says of envy:

It is the diabolical sin. From envy are born hatred, detraction, calumny, joy caused by the misfortune of a neighbor, and displeasure caused by his prosperity.”

David allowed this diabolical sin to seize him. He took Bathsheba, slept with her and then days later found out that she was pregnant. To cover up this mortal sin he called for Bathsheba’s husband to be brought back from the battle. David repeatedly tried to entice Uriah to go and sleep with his wife so all would believe the baby was conceived with him. But Uriah would not.

He was a man on duty, engaged in battle and would not be disloyal to those men with whom he was fighting by enjoying the embrace of his wife. So back to battle David sent him with a letter for Joab, the general, orchestrating the battle. We see just how deadly David's sin was because in his letter he instructed Joab to do the following:

“Put Uriah in the front lines where the fighting is the fiercest. Then pull back and leave him exposed so that he’s sure to be killed.”

Soon after Uriah is killed. When messengers bring tidings of his death to David he sends the following message back to General Joab:

Don’t trouble yourself over this. War kills—sometimes one, sometimes another—you never know who’s next.¹

David's conscience had been so dulled that there was no remorse for what he had caused to happen.

Now enter the Prophet Nathan who tells the most gripping parable of the Old Testament. Nothing else would grab David's attention.

“There were two men in the same city—one rich, the other poor. The rich man had huge flocks of sheep, herds of cattle. The poor man had nothing but one little female lamb, which he had bought and raised. It grew up with him and his children as a member of the family. It ate off his plate and drank from his cup and slept on his bed. It was like a daughter to him.

“One day a traveler dropped in on the rich man. He was too stingy to take an animal from his own herds or flocks to make a meal for his visitor, so he took the poor man's lamb and prepared a meal to set before his guest.”

David exploded in anger. “As surely as GOD lives,” he said to Nathan, “the man who did this ought to be lynched! He must repay for the lamb four times over for his crime and his stinginess!”

And then Nathan gives one of the most poignant responses in all of the Bible. “You David, you are that man”.

What can this story teach us?

Often it's crushing for us to discover that a person we admire has faults. An idealized parent disappoints. A friend we respect falls short. A political leader we support suffers his own particular downfall. A bishop or priest does not embody the person of Christ. Discouraged and hurt, we feel a bitterness that is hard to overcome.

When we look in the biblical record at David, certainly one of history's exceptional men and one whose faith is mentioned in both Testaments, we discover that he too had feet of clay. The saint

¹ Peterson, E. H. (2005). *The Message: the Bible in contemporary language* (2 Sa 11:25). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

is revealed as a sinner. And we wonder, “Why does God hold up as examples men and women who have such obvious flaws?”

A look at David’s life suggests a number of possible answers. For one thing, through David we are reminded that God is a realist. His Book contains no “let’s-pretend” whitewash of believers. Noting this, we may be helped to appreciate the fact that we can come to this God in spite of our own weaknesses. God won’t overlook them. But He won’t be crushed by our failures either. God knows that “we are dust” (Ps. 103:14).

For another thing, a revelation of saints’ failures as well as successes helps us to identify with them. If a David or an Abraham were represented as spiritually perfect, you and I would hardly feel close or similar to him. The truths that God is teaching us through their lives might be seen but might not be thought of as relevant. After all, we might think, “That’s all right for a spiritual giant like David! But what about poor, struggling me?” Then we discover that David struggled too. And sometimes he lost out to his weaknesses. David did know sin’s pull, just as we do. His experiences *are* relevant to us!

The New Testament affirms, “No temptation has seized you except what is common to all people” (1 Cor. 10:13). We are all bound up together in the shared ties of humanity. David knew the feelings and temptations that you know—and you know his! When the Bible accurately reports the failures and follies of God’s saints, it demonstrates this common bond and encourages us to identify our own inner struggles with theirs.

Most importantly, when Old Testament saints are shown to be sinners, Scripture is expressing something basic about the Gospel. The good news of God’s love for us is not, “Trust Me, and be freed of your humanity.” The good news of God’s love is that the Lord has committed Himself to deal with sin and to make us progressively more and more like Him. For progressive growth we always stand in need of God’s grace and aid. God deals with sin by the means of forgiveness. The greatness of David is not in his perfection but in his willingness to face his sin and to return wholeheartedly to God.

In today’s Gospel this theme is also on display. The woman who shed tears to wash Jesus’ feet and used her hair to dry them had been forgiven so much. Those who truly know what it means to be forgiven are most ready to then love and forgive much. Those who think they have it all together are quick to point the finger and judge others, as was Simon the Pharisee.

The readings today are brought into focus in the passage from Galatians where Paul says none of us can try to justify ourselves before God. Like David we stand before God and plead his mercy and forgiveness. Such is the theme of today’s Collect as well:

*O God, strength of those who hope in you,
graciously hear our pleas,
and, since without you mortal frailty can do nothing,
grant us always the help of your grace,
that in following your commands*

*we may please you by our resolve and our deeds.*²

When we choose to live and pray like this we will like David, and the woman in Luke be people after God's own heart.

² *The Roman Missal: Renewed by Decree of the Most Holy Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, Promulgated by Authority of Pope Paul VI and Revised at the Direction of Pope John Paul II.* (2011). (Third Typical Edition, p. 471). Washington D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.