

Sermon: “In Praise of Shame”

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But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord, 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. The rich man had very many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb that 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. 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.” 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; he shall restore the lamb fourfold because he did this thing and because he had no pity.”

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; 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. Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his 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. 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. 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 broad daylight. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and in broad daylight.” 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.

– 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a

A Fairy Tale?

Once upon a time there was a dear woman whose brave husband died in battle. She grieved deeply, and when a goodly amount of time had passed she turned her face to the future to move on with her life. And at that point a generous man invited her to become part of his household. They married, and she gave birth to a darling baby boy.

It reads like a fairy tale: one life ends and a new life begins, a widow is rescued from her misery and potential destitution by a generous man, sadness turns to joy, and they are poised to live happily ever after.

NOT! The Lord is Displeased

We could read the beginning of our first lesson that way, but the fairy tale ends SNAP!, just like that, when our story is just one paragraph old. We learn that “*the thing* this man had done displeased the Lord.” How can this be? This man is not just any man. This is David. This is the anointed king of God’s chosen people. He presents as a generous and noble man. So what is this *thing* he has done that gives his God no pleasure? This *thing* must be brought to his attention. There must be a reckoning, because *God always gets the last word*.

How Does Someone Get Your Attention?

How does someone get *your* attention when they want to tell you something important about yourself? How does *God* get our attention when God wants us to discover something about ourselves? That’s the question: how to communicate something important, but potentially uncomfortable, even shameful?

David Has to be Confronted. But How?

David has to be confronted about *the thing* he has done, and even, more importantly about *the person he has become*. But how? God can do this anyway God wants. Fire and brimstone? A plague of locusts? A barrage of CAPITAL LETTER emails to David’s in box? No. God is more subtle. God doesn’t overwhelm David. God undercuts him by sending the prophet Nathan, not to lecture him, but to tell him a story. Now the role of prophets in the Bible was not so much to predict the future as to help people discern the present. To help David *discern* the true nature of *the thing* he has done, and the true nature of the person he has become, Nathan tells him a story. It’s kind of a “counter-fairy tale.”

Nathan’s Story

Once upon a time there was a rich man who had everything he wanted. There was also a poor man who had nothing he needed. But the poor man did have *one* thing, something he *cherished*—a pet lamb whom he loved like his own daughter. Now the rich man, who had more sheep than he knew what to do with, got an unexpected visit from a stranger. And respecting the tradition of his culture, the rich man felt obligated to provide a meal—a nice meal—for his guest. The rich man had everything he needed to give a feast for his guest, but this man was not a *giver*. He was a *taker*. (You know the type.) He *took* the one thing the poor man cherished, his pet lamb, the one thing that comforted him in his miserable life, and the rich man slaughtered the lamb and served it to his guest. No happy ending there.

David is Shocked

David, who sees himself as generous and noble, is shocked by Nathan's story. He is incensed! He is the King. *He* will author a fitting ending to this story. "By God!" he shouts. "The greedy, pitiless man who has done *this thing* deserves to die!"

God is Still Displeased. Then the Stories Collide.

But God is no more pleased with David's reaction to this story than God was with *the thing* David had done and the person he had become. The purpose of Nathan's story, and the purpose of the story God gives us, the Jesus story that we call the gospel, is not to make us better *accusers* of others, but better *assessors* of ourselves.

Nathan's *story*, powerful as it is, doesn't move David all the way to the self-awareness that God wants him to have. The moment of transformation begins, suddenly and unexpectedly, when David's personal story and Nathan's prophetic story collide. David is incensed about "*the thing*" that this wicked rich man has done. But things change in the blink of an eye when Nathan says, "The man? The one who has done *this thing*? That's *you*. You are the man."

What happens when *our* story, and *God's* story aren't in sync?

My Story

When I was about half way through my internship as a seminarian, I was having a difficult time with my supervising pastor. A friend came to visit me and over lunch listened to me gripe and kvetch about my situation and air my sophomoric assumptions that not much good could come out of this internship. Then my friend cut me off mid-sentence and said, "You know, Brad, sometimes you can be pretty cynical." I didn't like what I was hearing. I didn't immediately embrace the truth of what she was saying. It took a while before I understood that she was my "Nathan," telling me "It's not about your supervisor. It's about you." (Side note: In my first year as a parish pastor a few years later, I quickly realized how much my former supervisor had taught me and how much I still had to learn. I wrote him a letter thanking him for everything he had taught me. He graciously responded with a thank you and spared me the shame of hearing him say, "I could have told you.")

David Gets It

David came around more quickly than I did. When Nathan said, "You are the man," something shifted. David realized that when he said, "The man who has done *this thing* deserves to die," he was describing himself. He made the connection between the rich man in Nathan's story and himself.

The thing he had done in taking in this widow was not, in fact, a generous gesture. *The thing* was in fact a despicable cover-up. *The thing* David had done was actually a series of things that revealed who he had become. The story is there in the verses preceding today's lesson if you want to read it. David had become a person

who lusted after someone else's wife, had his way with her, and got her pregnant. David became a deceitful and manipulative person who arranged for this woman's husband to be exposed on the front lines of battle where he was sure to be killed. And he was. David, like the rich man in Nathan's story, became a *taker*. And he realized that the God in whose image he was created is a *giver*.

Shame

This experience—when we are confronted with a truth about ourselves that we don't want to own, when we are exposed in a way that we didn't anticipate and weren't ready for—is called shame. It's about more than *the things* we've done. Shame is about who we are. Shame is the painful recognition that we are *the kind of person* who could do those things.

In Praise of (Healthy) Shame

Most of what we hear about shame these days is how terrible and toxic it is. And that we should purge it from our lives before it destroys us. But in the story of David and Nathan, God is speaking *in praise of shame*. But stay with me here, please! Not *all* shame is to be praised. Not the toxic, debilitating shame foisted on us by dysfunctional people and institutions that minoritizes or ostracizes us. There is no word of praise for the kind of shame that *deforms* us as persons. But the story before us this morning reminds us that there is such a thing as *healthy* shame. There is a kind of shame that *informs* us, in a generous and healthy way, about who we are becoming when we become “takers” rather than “givers.”

Having Access to a Different Story

What, then, makes it possible for us to heed the signal of healthy shame, to see that our story is becoming incongruent with the image of God in which we are created? I believe it is having access to a different story, to one that we believe and trust to be ultimately true. It is the story of our Creator who *always* tells us the truth, but *never* gives up on us. It's a story in which God always gets the last word, and the last word is always a *good word*. Because God is a giver, and not a taker. *It is the story of One willing to be broken on a cross so that we can feed on the power of his self-giving love as the very bread of life itself.*

David's Song

So what does David do after he allows healthy shame to have its way with him. Tradition tells us that he went off and wrote a song. We know it as Psalm 51. But when he first sang it, I think it might have sounded something like this old gospel number:

Give me a clean heart, so I may serve thee.
Lord, fix my heart so that I may be used by thee.
For I'm not worthy of all these blessings.
Give me a clean heart, and I'll follow thee.

Lord, I'm not asking for the riches of the land.
And I'm not asking for high folks to know my name.
Just give me, Lord, a clean heart and I'll follow thee.
Give me a clean heart, and I'll follow thee.

Now *that's* a praise song. AMEN.