

Pentecost 11, Year B  
2 Samuel 11:26-12:13  
August 5, 2018  
Bill Ellis

Last week Jed did something I found to be remarkably good. He does that a lot with his preaching, but this one stood out. He interpreted the story of David and Bathsheba from the point of view of modern ethical norms, and called that episode what it was, a sexual assault, a rape - a term he admitted he was loath to use in a sermon - but that is what it was. He went on to say that the story wasn't over, there would be accountability for this, and for a story that didn't have much good news in it, that accountability is very important. I found his words so compelling that I changed my mind that very moment and decided to talk this morning about that accountability in two ways. First let's note that there was any accountability at all, for in the historical context of the antique world that itself is significant. Second, when we ponder the nature of that accountability; it becomes apparent that it isn't satisfactory from our modern perspective. From there I want to think out loud for a moment about what this all says about our evolving understanding of the God we worship who was revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

Louis XIV was not the first monarch to say "I am the State." At the time the narrative we are considering was written - which I believe was not the 11th Century BC, but several hundred years later - (Oh well) most kings operated that way. They were above the law, and were free to do pretty much whatever they wanted either to or for their subjects. Good kings of course had the best interests of their people in mind, but that did not stop them from using their power to get what they wanted for their private lives. Women in particular had no rights most kings were

bound to respect; they were after all property, and property could be transferred, either by purchase or by force.

In this setting, therefore, it is remarkable that there was any accountability at all. David did what other kings did all the time; they saw something they liked and took it, and most monarchs felt free to take it overtly and without consequence even if what the monarch liked was a woman. But the Jews worshipped the God who had created a completely different moral universe from that. They worshipped the God whose sense of justice was such that even the king had to obey the law, even a king had to respect the rights of his subjects. In the economy of the God of the Jews, the true purpose of power is to protect and defend the powerless, to maintain a society in which the poor and defenseless could live in peace and safety. Power, most simply put was to be used to establish Justice, which meant to incarnate the compassion of God in law, and in the hearts of all people.

We know this for a fact because the whole prophetic witness of the Bible - what we call the Old Testament - condemned every Jewish monarch who failed to do that, and instead used his power to make himself comfortable at the expense of his people. Hundreds of years of prophetic critique - enshrined in the holiest books of Judaism - ought to convince everyone of this. So David was accountable to God for failing to use his power in the manner God had declared to be not just right, but righteous. David had, to use a very old fashioned term, sinned by abusing his power, by using it to exploit the defenseless for his own purposes, and we need to notice that this understanding of sin was unique to the Jewish understanding of their relationship to God. This, by the way, is why I just can't place this story in the 10th Century BC when David is supposed to have ruled. The scholars I read argue convincingly that this understanding took centuries to

develop under the influence of many prophetic witnesses. But never mind, consider instead how the author of this story viewed the nature of David's sin. Here, problems arise for us that we need to notice.

When confronted by Nathan, and convinced he had done a horrible thing, David declares that he had sinned "against the Lord," not against Bathsheba and not against Uriah. He had done this first by violating Uriah's property rights, and second by having Uriah killed in battle. This becomes obvious when Nathan uses the metaphor of a rich man taking a poor man's little ewe lamb. David had broken the tenth commandment, which we abbreviate to read "Thou shalt not covet." In both Exodus and Deuteronomy the text prohibits coveting your neighbor's "house, or wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor." Notice that, neighbor is a man, women are on the list of what the man owns. The whole story makes clear that Bathsheba was property that belonged to Uriah, and that David's sin was stealing something from another man. Then, when his attempt to cover this property theft came to nothing because of the Uriah's fidelity, he compounded the crime by conspiring to have Uriah murdered, for that is what it amounted to. If we want to understand the history of the evolution of our own faith, we need to understand this fact, that at this point in the history of Israel, women were still thoroughly dehumanized. In this story David is not held accountable for one crime against a woman and one crime against a man. He is held accountable for two crimes against a man, both of which violate God's law through the abuse of power. Bathsheba is a cypher.

Yet today, at least 2,500 years later if the scholars I read are right, and 3,000 years later if the more conservative biblical scholars are correct, we can't dehumanize Bathsheba any more, and we can't read this story as a property crime against a man followed by the murder of that

man. Last week Jed woke us all up to the truth that from our perspective this is first the story of a terrible crime against a woman - a full human being who is no one's property - and then it is about the murder of her husband, not her owner. The reason we got here from there is because the Judeo-Christian tradition we celebrate every week, has led us slowly, painfully, through our own constant betrayals, from that point to this. Over centuries that tradition has brought us to an ever larger understanding of who is included in the scope of God's love and compassion - who is family, in other words - until now we can begin to imagine that truly the whole world and all the people in it, wherever they are from, and whatever culture they have, are part of the economy of this one God of the Jews.

By comparing this ancient story with where we are today one inescapable conclusion simply forces itself upon us. Our tradition is dynamic, it leads us - and has always led us - in the direction of an ever expanding view of God's love, and thus an ever expanding view of just who we are called to name as neighbor, and who deserves the protection of the law and the dignity that comes from being a child of God. Collectively we have resisted that dynamism every step of the way; just as the people Israel resisted it, so too do we see signs everywhere around us that this dynamism is being resisted now. And for the record, I am not just talking about the current administration - though I include it in this statement - I am talking about every human heart that defines and limits what truly belongs, what truly deserves protection, something every one of us has done, and continues to do.

We do it not because we are faithless, but because following God through the evolution of our tradition is agonizingly hard work. It is so much easier to believe our tradition is static, that it leads us to a specific end, not a path that has no end. Life becomes so much more

manageable when we allow ourselves to believe that we have at last encompassed the fullness of what constitutes the family of God and may therefore rest assured that at last we are following the whole will of God. To realize our tradition is dynamic, that it leads us on, is at once to admit that we will never be able to rest assured that we are following the whole will of God, which is why the difference between where we are today and where we were when the story of Nathan and David was written is so important. Let us take courage from this powerful tradition, courage that enables us to not deny that difference, nor be defeated by it, but instead be encouraged by it, knowing that this difference reveals the direction God would have us travel as we move ever more deeply into the dynamism which is the life of God within and among us.