

ME TOO
II Samuel 11:1-15
Psalm 14
Ephesians 3:14-221
John 6:1-21

The text we just read from the Hebrew Scriptures should be wrapped in plain brown paper and marked with a warning label. This is what Professor Phyllis Tribble calls a text terror.ⁱ It is the all too common story of a powerful man exercising that power to satisfy his lust and then initiate a cover-up. It is a story that Bathsheba could add to the hundreds of others like it on #MeToo. And like some of those other stories, what makes it even more shocking was who the man was. David was Israel's greatest and most beloved king. Handsome and courageous, he brought together the twelve Hebrew tribes to form one nation, established Jerusalem as the political and religious capital, and conquered Israel's enemies. His backstory was like a made-for-TV movie—poor shepherd boy makes good and becomes a popular and mighty monarch. Given all this, why would this sordid story of rape and murder be included in the Hebrew Scriptures? Why wouldn't Israel want to preserve a whitewashed version of their great king's story?

I think there are two reasons why David's story was preserved. First, it is a reminder that David was human. With this horrific text included, there was no possibility of making David into a fairy-tale king, no chance of elevating him to god status. There is no denying David's sinfulness. Convinced that he could have whatever he desired, David lustily indulged himself with no restraint, no second thoughts, no reservations, and then murdered by proxy to cover his tracks. Here was the kind of king the prophet Samuel had earlier warned Israel against—one who would be a taker of sons and daughters, crops and cattle, who would use the people for his own ends.ⁱⁱ This story shows David to be recognizably human and unworthy of worship.

The second reason this story of David was preserved is because it teaches something about God. You see, the story does not end with the murder of Uzziah and Bathsheba becoming David's wife. There is a part two, which goes like this. Nathan, the prophet, showed up at the palace and told David a story, "...a simple story about a rich man with large flocks of sheep who need[ed] a lamb for a dinner he [was] giving. Instead of taking a lamb from his own flocks, he cruelly and arrogantly [took] the pet lamb of a poor man living down the street. He [killed] the lamb and [served] it up to his guests."ⁱⁱⁱ Upon hearing the story, David, the angry, indignant, dispenser of justice, passed a death sentence on the rich man, only to be confronted with the words, "You are the man!"^{iv}

Here is the turning point for David. He could deny the accusation, claiming that it was not lust that caused him to send for Bathsheba but love; he could argue that Uzziah died as many soldiers do, sad but not of David's doing; he could have Nathan imprisoned or worse, to keep him quiet. Or David could acknowledge his sin, repent and throw himself on God's mercy. This was the choice David made. He realized his position before God—as a sinner, a person in trouble, a person in need of God's help and mercy.

And this brings us to the second reason this story has been preserved—it has something important to say about God. When David confessed, “I have sinned against the Lord.” Nathan gave the assurance, “The Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die.”^v What makes the story so powerful and so valuable is that it declares that David’s sin, as enormous as it was, was greatly outdone by God’s mercy.

We may be tempted to skip over this whole sordid story and choose to stick to an image of David the good shepherd, the giant killer, the great king, but if we do, we would lose these two important lessons—that even great leaders are human and therefore, flawed, imperfect and sinful, and unworthy of our worship, and second and more importantly, that God stands ready to forgive.

We cannot skip over David’s story because it is a Me Too story, it is our story. We, too, are flawed, imperfect and sinful. Our sins may not be rape or murder, but at the base of all sin is same desire to be gods ourselves, to claim control over our own lives and the lives of others, to be the center of the universe. We forget who made us and think we are answerable only to ourselves. Two weeks ago, Scott reminded us of God’s plumb line by which we are called to measure our actions, a plumb line which calls for love of God and neighbor, a plumb line which, when we are honest, we know we fail to live up to.

Week by week in worship we pray together a prayer of confession, an acknowledgment of our sin, our individual, particular sins and our collective sin. It isn’t comfortable, to be sure. The prayer may actually put words in our mouths that we don’t want to say or may not fit our situation, but even then we are confessing the brokenness of the society and the world of which we are a part.

Confession is a humbling experience. None of us wants to admit our failures, our nasty little words, our by-passing of a neighbor’s need, our inflated sense of deserving. But David’s story reminds us that confession is not about beating ourselves up, not a groveling admission that we are terrible people. It is a story of hope, a reminder that we are created, redeemed, blessed and loved by God. It is a reminder that even though we try to avoid God because we know we have done wrong, even though we act like we are little gods, even though we are hopelessly entangled in sin, God’s grace is available to us. When David admitted his sin, he was not condemned, but saved. So too for us. When we come to God honestly, humbly, saying how it is with us, we are not condemned but saved from our loneliness, despair and anger, our self-deception and self-obsession. We discover both who we actually are, flawed and needy but beloved, and who God is, gracious, forgiving and loving.

In our weekly liturgy, when we confess our sin, we practice, we learn and relearn, we take a step back into right relationship with the One who loves us with a fierce and mighty love. Every week, we engage in the humbling practice of facing our own brokenness and our complicity in the world’s moral failings and we do so in confidence, trusting in the mercy that awaits us. We confess our sin, we hear again and claim the gift of forgiveness, we are reconciled and set at peace with God and neighbor. Sunday by

Sunday, we remember and claim again that God in Christ has taken on our sin and washed it away. We are shaped by this practice and humbled by it, even as we reconnect with the amazing grace of God, which, by forgiveness, makes us right with God.

But there is more. Confession, pardon and peace is not only about our relationship with God, it is also about our relationship with our neighbor. As we acknowledge our own brokenness, surely we are made more tender toward our neighbor and her brokenness, his failure. If God loves us, undeserving though we be, then surely God also loves our neighbor. That reality changes how we treat our neighbor, especially how we treat the neighbor with whom we disagree. Having experienced the deep joy and hope that comes with confessing our frailty and receiving God's forgiveness, we can bring that understanding to our challenging conversations and relationships with those around us. Imagine how different a conversation might be on some hot topic like vaccination resistance or abortion if we saw both ourselves and the other guy as beloved of God.

The ancient bishop, Augustine, tells how in his North African congregation, when people came to the petition in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts," they would fall silent. He praised them for at least having the guts to admit that they had no intention of being true to the second part of the petition, "as we forgive our debtors."^{vi} I would also suggest that they were silent because they weren't really prepared to admit to their own sin and therefore not ready to receive the gracious gift of being forgiven. Denying their own brokenness kept them from taking up the assignment from Jesus to forgive.

Our society is deeply divided, polarized, lacking a foundation of trust and seemingly unable to come together. In our weekly routine of confession, pardon and peace, we participate in a culture of forgiveness and hope grounded in God's love. That weekly practice helps us to be the kind of community and the kind of people whose witness is capable of loving that world in all its brokenness and otherness.

So our thanks be God for the author of II Samuel who took the risk to write honestly about the great man, David, and his sin, and thanks be to God for the gift of forgiveness given to David and to us. As forgiven sinners, people reconciled to God, may we be agents of God's reconciliation in the world.

ⁱ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

ⁱⁱ I Samuel 8:10-18.

ⁱⁱⁱ Eugene H. Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall*, (New York: HarperOne, 1997), p.184.

^{iv} II Samuel 12:1-13.

^v II Samuel 12:13.

^{vi} Cited by Will Willimon, "Praying the Lord's Prayer in a Pandemic," *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2021, p.38.