

Third Sunday After Pentecost, Year C

June 13, 2010

2 Samuel 11: 26-12:10, 13-15; Psalm 32; Galatians 2: 15-21; Luke 7: 36-8:3

2 Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13-15

{26} When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. *{27}* When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD, *{12:1}* 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. *{2}* The rich man had very many flocks and herds; *{3}* but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which 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. *{4}* 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." *{5}* 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; *{6}* he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity." *{7}* 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; *{8}* 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. *{9}* 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. *{10}* 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.... *{12:13}* 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. *{14}* Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the LORD, the child that is born to you shall die." *{15}* Then Nathan went to his house. The LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and it became very ill.

Psalm 32

{32} Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. *{2}* Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. *{3}* While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. *{4}* For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah *{5}* Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and you forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah *{6}* Therefore let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them. *{7}* You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with glad cries of deliverance. Selah *{8}* I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. *{9}* Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle, else it will not stay near you. *{10}* Many are the torments of the wicked, but steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the LORD. *{11}* Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.

Galatians 2:15-21

{15} We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; *{16}* yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. *{17}* But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! *{18}* But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. *{19}* For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; *{20}* and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. *{21}* I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.

Luke 7:36-8:3

{36} One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. {37} And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. {38} She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. {39} Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said 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." {40} Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "Speak." {41} "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii's, and the other fifty. {42} When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" {43} Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." {44} Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. {45} You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. {46} You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. {47} Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." {48} Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." {49} But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" {50} And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."... {8:1} Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, {2} as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, {3} and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

You're so vain, you probably think this song is about you. You're so vain, I'll bet you think this song is about you, don't you, don't you?

So goes the chorus from the fabulous song of 1972, sung by the always-fabulous Carly Simon.

Apart from the catchy beat, the great voice, and that it just has a "cool sound", I really don't know all that much about this song. My suspicion is that it has something to do with "unrequited love", but then again, don't most songs? That chorus has a way of getting your attention, making you listen, and drawing you in. "Wait. *Is* this song about me?" "If I'm even wondering whether or not the song might be about me, does that mean the song is about me?" "How can I tell if the song is about me without, in the first place, wondering whether or not it is? And, if I'm wondering all that, doesn't that make the song about me after all?" The trap is cleverly set. There certainly doesn't seem to be any way out.

With all due respect to Ms. Simon, it turns out that the prophet Nathan and Jesus did the same thing a few thousand years ago.

I believe the first reading and the Gospel, just by the way they are written, still continue to draw us in and raise the question, "Who me?" "Can this be about *me*?"

Another way to approach these stories is to think about which of the characters strikes you or you identify most closely with. If, like me, you can't help but blurt out a somewhat self satisfied, "Busted!", when it comes to David and Simon, then I suspect we a lot more like those two characters than we care to notice or admit.

Nathan is a really cool guy. Who doesn't like to be a "whistle blower" or, in the words of Gandhi, "speak truth to power."? Sometimes, that's exactly what we as individual Christians and as a Church have to do. At times it can come at a very high cost. Every now and then there can be a bit of a "rush" to it. While there is always a time and a place for the "Nathans" of our world and in our lives, the danger is that by focusing exclusively on what's wrong with situations of people around us, we forget to take a look in the mirror occasionally. We forget that the words, "You are the one!" are addressed as much to us as they are to anyone else. When I first entered the Franciscans, there were five of us and, within a year, we were down to two; myself and one other classmate. Now, he happened to be particularly obnoxious and always really quick to point out the faults and failings of others, frequently leaving behind a trail of victims. His response always was, "Well, I just have to tell my truth." Eventually, after I had already left, the other brothers decided to "return the favor", by offering some truth of their own. He left the Order.

We can so overly identify with the woman of the Gospel story that we feel we have to be sorry all the time for something. If we are really serious about Christianity, then we need to be really sorry and to focus on our sinfulness. Do we really want sorrow to be the basis of our relationship with God? Does God want that? That leads to a lot of guilt, shame, and blame; things I believe fly in the face of Gospel freedom. In fact, excessive guilt, sorrow, and shame on the part of one particularly sensitive monk gave birth to the Reformation. If, however, you do want to do the shame and sorrow thing, there are, unfortunately, plenty of expressions of Christianity that appear to be more than willing to oblige. Some churches have what they call the "sinner's prayer", which basically begins with an acknowledgment of how bad we are and how sorry we are, and then asks Jesus to come into our hearts. Is that how Jesus treated people? Is that how He treated Simon or the woman?

This time around in the lectionary cycle, my favorite character happens to be Simon the Pharisee. He was so delightfully unaware of the blessing right in front of him but, nevertheless, gave Jesus even a begrudging

welcome into his life. What happened to Simon after that dinner party remains open in the story. Did he get it? Did he change? No matter what happened, I'm sure he received much more than he bargained for.

The identity of the man whom Carly Simon so wonderfully lambasted remains, to this day, a mystery. Apparently Ms. Simon once commented that it was about "men in general", but most fans didn't buy that answer. No matter who it is (or was), my suspicion is that the intent was to "vent" a bit and even to shame, ridicule, and induce guilt (making some money wasn't all that bad either).

That's not even close to what Nathan was doing with King David and Jesus was doing with Simon the Pharisee. Rather than shame, ridicule, or blame, I believe their stories were invitations to transformation issued by a God who fiercely loves even the most unlovable among us. Invitations by a God who sends out a search and rescue team long before we even realize how far off course we've wandered.

It is tempting, fun, and helpful to focus on some of the characters in these stories, but let's not forget that, as always, the real and main character is God. The God who comes to us even when, like David, we have fallen far short of the ideal. The God who comes to us when we, like that woman, are really, really sorry. Best of all, the God who comes to us when we are delightfully unaware and not feeling the need to be sorry for much of anything.

We can do the shame, guilt, and perpetual sorrow thing, but we hear these stories correctly when we come away with an overwhelming sense of gratitude. Make that the basis of your relationship with God.

I found a quote from Luther, though it may not exactly fit, speaks about living in gratitude rather than shame. He is specifically speaking about Holy Communion, but the statement can be understood much more generally.

For it is just this incomprehensible overflowing of God's goodness, showered upon us through Christ, that moves us above all to love him most ardently in return, to be drawn to him with fullest confidence... Wherefore this sacrament is rightly called "a fountain of love."

Let us take an illustration of this from human experience. If a very rich lord were to bequeath a thousand gulden to a beggar or to an unworthy and wicked servant, it is certain he would boldly claim them and accept them without regard to his unworthiness and the greatness of the bequest. And if anyone should seek to oppose him on the grounds of his unworthiness and the large amount of the legacy, what do you suppose the man would say? He would likely say: "What is that to you? What I accept, I accept no on my merits or by any right that I may personally have to it. I know that I am receiving more than a worthless one like me deserves; indeed, I have deserved the very opposite. But I claim what I claim by the right of a bequest and of another's goodness. If to him it was not an unworthy thing to bequeath so great a sum to an unworthy

person, why should I refuse to accept it because of my unworthiness? Indeed, it is for this very reason that I cherish all the more his unmerited gift—because I am unworthy!
(From, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*)

You probably think this song is about, don't you?

So what if it is. It turns out that the only song that really matters is the one being sung by none other than Love itself, "the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2: 20b)

Let us pray. Lord, you are full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love; you will not always accuse us, nor will you keep your anger forever. You have not dealt with us according to our sins, nor repaid us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is your steadfast love for those who fear you. As far as the east is from the west so far have you removed our transgressions from us...For you know well how we are formed; you remember that we are but dust.
(Psalm 103: 8-12, 14)

AMEN.