

“Truth Telling”
2 Samuel 11: 26-12:15

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CCUMC

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Introduction

Last week we heard the story of David’s abuse of power toward Bathsheba. We read of his military maneuvers to cover the illicit pregnancy that resulted in the murder of Uriah. In this week’s reading, we will hear the prophet Nathan speak to David. We first met Nathan a couple of weeks ago; Nathan had to muster the courage to tell David that God did not want the king to build an elaborate temple to house the divine. Now, Nathan has much, much more difficult truth-telling to do to a king wrapped in a shroud of self-deception. Nathan has to prompt David’s conscience to understand the sin of adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah that he has done. Hear now the reading of 2 Samuel 11: 26-12:15.

I. Self Deception

Self deception. Lloyd H. Steffen, in his article “On Honesty and Self- Deception,” defines it this way, “self deception occurs when people who are committed to certain values act against those values while convincing themselves that what they are doing does not in fact violate those values.”¹ Put another way, self deception is avoiding the truth about who we are and what we do; it is failing to be honest with ourselves. We are never more likely to be in its grip than those moments when we are sure we are not.

We see examples of it when people’s behavior, and their interpretation of it, holds a serious gap. The disciple Peter told himself that he would never betray Jesus, but when his own life was on the line, that’s exactly what he did. “Who, Jesus? I don’t know him.”

When people interpret their behavior in ways that seem farfetched, self-deception is present.

¹ Lloyd H. Steffen, “On Honesty and Self Deception: ‘You are the man’” *Christian Century* (1987).

“I don’t have an eating disorder; I’m just trying to lose some extra weight.” “I don’t have a drinking problem; I just have a few beers at night to relax.” Such a loss of honesty affects one’s inner life, until a person can’t trust even his or herself.

For family members and friends, telling someone that truth, “that they are the man” as did Nathan, requires enormous courage. Truth telling is hard and painful, though it is often holy work.² Confronting sin in another is a task to be undertaken with great skill and humility.

Deception and Truth Telling in Literature

Story-telling remains a skillful way to tell truth in a way that others might hear. Good authors can tell the truth to a culture practicing deception. Author Flannery O’Conner remains a master of using parables to tell the truth to people hard of hearing. In a Southern culture in which truth remains hidden and deception soaks the air like the humidity in August, O’Conner used fiction and the genre of the grotesque to tell the truth.

In her first book, *Wise Blood*, O’Conner uses a flashy peddler of a church of cheap grace (where you can join for a dollar) called Onnie Jay Holy, and a reluctant prophet named Hazel Motes to critique American Southern Christianity. Sick of a church culture that privileged individual interpretations of Scripture over the whole community and its theological heritage, O’Conner has Onnie Jay Holy say, “You can sit at home and interpret your own Bible however you feel in your heart it ought to be interpreted.” Hazel Motes teaches Onnie Jay (and the rest of the South) that such an individualistic, capitalist church is a lie. “Hazel’s wise blood teaches that how he lives and what he believes really does matter,

² Joshua Carney, “Reflections on the Lectionary” *Christian Century* (July 25, 2012), 21.

and this is not a world where anything goes.”³ Flannery O’Conner serves as a prophet, telling a skillful story of truth so that self-deceivers in her culture might hear.

II. Nathan and Truth-Telling

The prophet Nathan in our text today also skillfully tells a story so that a very powerful self-deceiver might be able to hear his own complicity. David, at the beginning of our text today, has succumbed to the illusion that his power has protected him from the truth. He thinks through his royal privilege he’s been able to sweep his criminal behavior under the rug; he marries Bathsheba and goes about his kingly duties. He doesn’t seem too troubled by his deception. God, however, names David’s action as evil and calls upon Nathan to tell the truth to power.

Nathan, knowing that a bald accusation might get him killed, invents a creative parable. This story of a rich man with many sheep and a poor man with just one precious ewe is a juridical parable—a tale to disguise a real life situation in order to draw a guilty party into passing judgment on himself.⁴ This story of contrasts, of rich vs. poor, of many vs. few, reverses expectations when the rich man takes (*laqab*) the poor man’s one child-like ewe and serves it to a guest in a crass form of injustice masquerading as hospitality. David and we as readers are incensed at such wrong-doing.

Nathan then cleverly turns the story to David with a famous short sentence—“You are the man.” This succinct and powerful statement speaks truth to power—calling the powerful to account. Nathan then shifts to a prophetic announcement of all of God’s gracious care that David has just abused. David’s acts will result in consequences; David will be judged for what he has done.

³ Matthew Schobert, “The Prophet as Storyteller,” *The Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University* (2003) www.ChristianEthics.ws. Accessed on July 29, 2012.

⁴ Bruce Birch, “1 and 2 Samuel” in *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary* vol 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998).1292-3.

David finally has to look at himself. David finally recognizes that he is the exploiter, the perpetrator of grave injustice, the one who had much and took from one who had little. This former shepherd has had the wool pulled from his eyes so that he can now see his own treachery. David still does possess a conscience; he is able to hear the truth from Nathan. He hasn't lost the ability to choose God. He repents, "I have sinned against the Lord."

However, David's acts still do hold consequences. The current baby that Bathsheba conceived out of David's violence will die. This is hard—that an innocent will die for David's sin. Remember, this is an ancient culture much different than our own, in which the concept of "blood-guilt" held sway. "Blood guilt" means that David's act creates its own unavoidable consequences. The death of the newborn baby is not God's responsibility, but the unavoidable consequence of the violation of the created order by David.⁵ David's sons Amnon and Absalom will engage in treachery that flows from David's sin. While David lives, his own sons will die from their inheritance of violence (stay tuned for next week). David's own embrace of the truth about himself after his self-deception still doesn't preserve him from tragedy.

Nonetheless, David's confession sets him on the path of repentance, of going in a different way, of deferring power to piety. This confession marks the end of David as the power hungry monarch. God doesn't leave David in the depths of guilt, but calls him to move forward. David's life will be preserved. The promise we heard God make to David and Israel that God would remain faithful no matter what God's people do holds. David's confession holds within it the beginning of new life---a life born to David and Bathsheba

⁵ Stephen Chapman, "Reading Bible as Witness: Divine Retribution in the OT," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* (July 1, 2004), 184.

named Solomon, who will be the next king.⁶ Truth spoken to power can open the door for God's grace to work.

III. The Church and Truth-Telling

Nathan and David offer two possibilities for how we might be called to act. Acting as Nathan, we may be called to do the difficult, tricky work of truth-telling. We may be called to step up and tell someone, "you're the man (or the woman)."

We are called also as the church to be a prophet speaking truth to power. With the skill of Nathan or of a Flannery O'Connor, we are to expose the injustices in our culture. With parables or other clever means we are to speak to people of privilege who are the King Davids of our day, and expose their own self-deceptions.

To whom do we speak truth? To whom are we called to be a prophet and say "You are the man—or woman or company" who is enmeshed in self-deception. I would gently suggest that there might be power at work in our Carbondale community to whom truth might need to be spoken. Any thoughts on what power that might be?

I would gently offer that we in the church community should think deeply about the practice of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, in the sensitive environmental area of Thompson Divide just above us. Strong arguments exist for and against fracking, and as a church we are called to explore such an issue that is roiling our community. Our truth-telling must be rooted in scripture, employ our ability to reason, stem from listening to people who have experienced fracking positively and negatively, and move forward our history of social and prophetic ministries in the light of our Wesleyan heritage and the Social Principles found in our Book of Discipline.⁷ How might we speak creatively and skillfully, like the prophet

⁶ Robert Hoch, workingpreacher.org. accessed on July 29, 2012.

⁷ Mark Terwillinger, "Fracking God's Creation," www.umc-gbcs.org/site accessed on August 1, 2012.

Nathan, as this issue divides our community into opposing camps? If you are interested in a forum (whether a meeting after church or during Sunday School hour) for us as a church and as a member of the Carbondale community to explore the issue of fracking in the context of our Christian faith, please let me know.

On the other hand, we might called to be David out of this text. We are called to see where we might be practicing self-deception. How might we be “the man or the woman” doing destruction in our life of which we might not fully be aware? Of what might we need to repent and confess? We will shortly practice again a prayer of confession, as we did last week. May this prayer be an opportunity for us as a church and as individuals to repent, to turn to a new life, empowered by the faithful promises of God. May the communion that follows be an opportunity for us to feed on God’s grace for us, recreating us as forgiven and beloved disciples of Christ. Amen