

When I was a child, my parents did something very cruel to me. They did it every week. They made me sit through a Presbyterian Church service. These days the kids hear a short talk and pray a prayer in big church before being dismissed to a children’s paradise of crafts, games, and a Bible lesson interspersed with hyperactive insanity.

Not back in the day. We went to Sunday school first; then we had to sit through the entire adult service. My brother and I found ways to entertain ourselves. Thumbing through the hymnal, or watching a squirrel climb an oak tree outside the window, or giggling at the toddler who turned around in the pew ahead of us to scope out the people in the seats behind him.

But there was one thing that would stop any horseplay instantly: my mom’s evil eye. It had magical powers. I’d be goofing off, amusing myself in various ways—like some of you do here—when suddenly I’d feel it fall upon me from down the pew. Filled with mild terror, I’d sit poker straight for the rest of the service, praying the gaze of her squinted eye would move toward the pastor where she was supposed to be looking. Then he would wonder what he had done or said to get the evil eye. Just thinking of it still scares me. But these days, I think I’m really well behaved in church.

“Well behaved” is not the way I would describe King David in this chapter of his life. As the Scripture for today begins David is picking up the pieces of his adultery/rape/cover-up/murder. Uriah was killed on David’s orders. Bathsheba properly mourned her husband’s death. And now David sends for Bathsheba once again, this time to take her for his wife.

I don’t think David had any intention of marrying her until he found out she was pregnant. To cover up his sordid affair, he felt he had to kill the husband. Now the cover up continues by marrying the woman who is bearing his child. This seems like an act of duty and not love. We later learn that this child dies, and the death is understood as the judgment of God on David. Chapter 11 ends with a clear statement from God, “*But the thing David had done displeased the LORD.*” So God sends Nathan to confront David with his sin. Nathan gives David, what we might call, “the evil eye.”

But one has to be careful when confronting powerful people with their sins. This isn’t mom trying to get the kids to straighten up in church, this is God’s representative getting in the face of the king of Israel so that he confesses his own personal weakness and heinous sin. Tact is required to get a powerful person to see their own mistakes. For example, the worst thing you can ever do, I’m told, is to call a liar a liar to their face. You can only call them a liar in indirect ways. You might say, “Not everything you say has the ring of truth to it.” But you never simply call a liar a liar.

In the same way, Nathan doesn’t make sparks fly by confronting David directly. Instead, he tells an ingenious story (an allegory to be exact) that results in David’s righteous indignation. He tells of two men in a city. The one was rich and the other poor. The rich man has large flocks and herds, while the poor man has only one prized ewe lamb. The poor man loves this lamb so much that he treats it like his child. The lamb ate, drank, and slept with him. When a guest arrives at the rich man’s house, he was hesitant to kill one of his own animals. Instead, the rich man takes the poor man’s prized lamb and feeds it to his guest.

It really is a story of gross injustice. We are shocked by such a heartless act and the abuse of power. David's reaction is like our own. He's shocked and angry: *David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this must die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity (12:5-6).*

The commentators point out that there are no names, places, witnesses or other petitioners involved. The story is obviously an allegory of injustice as a way to confront David. Nathan brings the matter to its dramatic conclusion when he declares, "*You are the man!*" David is the one who had much and took possession of something from one who had little. David is who exploited Uriah and soiled Bathsheba and is guilty of the injustice that David roundly condemns. The main point of Nathan's story is that someone committed an injustice. David's story is like Nathan's story in that David uses his position and power to "take" what belonged to another person.

Then comes a prophetic oracle announcing the judgment of God. The message from God begins by recounting all that God had done for David: "*I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave your master's house to you, and your master's wives into your arms. I gave you all Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own*" (12:7-9).

God is shown to be the giver, while David is the receiver, who becomes the taker. Surprisingly, God states a willingness to have given David even more, but now David has moved from merely receiving God's good gifts to taking what he wants. From God's perspective, David's sin was against God and not just against Uriah and Bathsheba. It's a reminder that God always seems to take the side of the victimized, the oppressed and the poor. In his first sermon, Jesus said, quoting Isaiah, "*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor*" (Luke 4:18-19).

The announcement of God's punishment is signaled in verse 10 with, "*Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own*" (12:10). The violence David has done against Uriah and Bathsheba will be visited on David's own family. And indeed David's family story is a tragic and violent one.

In verse 13, we come at last to David's response. He does not turn on Nathan or reject Nathan's harsh words. He offers no alibis, excuses, or explanations. He does not assert his authority or attempt to justify himself. He simply says, "*I have sinned against the LORD.*" Simple and direct.

But the consequences of his actions still ring through this story and the pages that follow. David is forgiven with a "but" that follows. In verse 14 Nathan adds, "*BUT because by doing this you have shown utter contempt for the LORD, the son born to you will die.*" David was forgiven by God, but he reaped the consequences of his sin. What David did cannot be undone. Life can be reclaimed and continue in the midst of the consequences of sin, but the tragic reverberations from David's sin continue to be felt in his family for generations.

We too can be forgiven. But we still have to deal with the consequences of our actions. In God's sight our sin is removed as Psalm 103 says, "*as far as the east is from the west,*" but what is done cannot be undone.

Forever David will be remembered for his words of true repentance and humble confession found in Psalm 51: "*Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love; according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! ... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.*" In the end David will not be defined by his greatest failure, but rather by his honest confession of sin and his true repentance.

There will always be consequences of our sinful actions. But we can always pray, as David did, "*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.*" Amen.