

The Courage to Challenge, Confess, and Change

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman

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Pentecost 10

2 Samuel 11: David and Bathsheba, Joab and Nathan

The top film of 1951 was *David and Bathsheba*, earning approximately \$7 million. Gregory Peck starred as King David and Susan Hayward as Bathsheba. *The New York Times* described the film as “a reverential and sometimes majestic treatment of chronicles that have lived three millennia.” It praised the screenplay and Peck’s “authoritative performance,” while noting the part largely overshadowed the rest of the cast.

Reading further in the commentary, I learned that the screenwriters took remarkable license with the story. We know how different films can be from the original book. But the changes made here were astonishing! In the film, Bathsheba is an unhappy neglected wife. Uriah is too busy being a good soldier to be home as a good husband. So, get this: Bathsheba stalks King David. She goes after him! One of the explanations for this change was to reflect the greater independence and economic self-sufficiency of post-World War II women.

Really! In the movie the great king cannot resist Bathsheba, the attraction becomes mutual, so a steamy affair ensues. This is not at all how the story happened!

The story of David and Bathsheba, Joab and Nathan is one of coercive, premeditative and abusive power; cover up, confrontation, and confession. In the story, the great king did exactly what Samuel warned that kings would do: He took.

In Hebrew, the long, dramatic narrative can be summarized in six short phrases:

I am pregnant. (Bathsheba)

You are the man. (Nathan)

I have sinned. (David)

Crime.

Confrontation.

Confession.

Bathsheba was most certainly not a twentieth-century American wife, lonely and lusting for the hot king. The Bible tells us she was the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah, the Hittite.

Perhaps the emphasis on her family serves to indicate that she was a woman from a good family. That fact that she is named in scripture is unusual. Only about nine percent of the names in the Bible belong to women.[1]

The story is not complicated by love or affection of any kind. There is no dinner, no conversation. Notice how abrupt, cold, and non-consensual the verbs are. David is responsible and only David.

Thousands of years have passed since this scene. Yet the World Health Organization reports that violence against women is a major health problem and a violation of women's human rights. Global estimates published by WHO indicate that about one in three (35%) of women worldwide have experienced either partner or non-partner violence in their lifetime.

Women are more likely to experience violence if they have low education, were exposed to their mothers being abused, were abused during childhood, or were raised with attitudes accepting violence, male privilege, and women's subordinate status.

Men are more likely to perpetrate violence against women if they have a low education, were exposed to domestic violence against their mothers, abused alcohol, were raised with unequal gender norms accepting violence, and have a sense of entitlement over women.

(But we also know that violence against women knows no national, political, ethnic, religious, or socio-economic boundaries. It happens here. It happens everywhere. The social and economic impact of violence against women is enormous and ripples throughout society.)

The World Health Organization urges enacting and enforcing legislation, developing and implementing policies that promote gender equality.

Earlier this summer, several members met for four weeks to discuss the ELCA Task Force "Draft Social Statement on Women and Justice." (ALL members of the ELCA are invited to read the draft and respond by September 30. [You can do this online!](#)) In the opening "Basic Statement," titled "Our Common Foundation," we read:

[W]e believe God's intention for humanity is abundant life for all. This calls us to equity and justice for all with respect to issue of gender and sex. We confess that the world is broken by sin. Relying on God's promise in the Gospel, we are bold to declare that patriarchy and sexism are both sinful and found with in our own faith tradition and our society. [2]

As Lutherans, we recognize that acting justly within the home, the church, society, and civic life for the good of all is one the vocations to which God calls all people. [3]

We know in our own time and culture that not only less-educated men who grew up in abusive homes and have trouble with alcohol abuse have power. In the climate of the #MeToo Movement, we read every day of men with power, position, and wealth who are abusive against women.

The review about the film *David and Bathsheba* said that Gregory Peck “overshadows the rest of the cast.” Characters like David take up all of the air in the room. And then some!

David—the shepherd boy, youngest son, handsome one, the confident and successful slinger, the great warrior—is now the bored king. At the time of our story, he had six wives (seven, if we count Michal, whom he probably abandoned). David is not where he is supposed to be, with his troops on the battlefield. Instead, he takes time to spy on Bathsheba.

Samuel had warned, “These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take (1 Samuel 8:1-18). And David did.

When Bathsheba sent word that she was pregnant. David’s head spun. He was not the first or the last man who panicked when hearing these words! David called for Joab, his “fixer.” But the plan to give Uriah time off from the battlefield, to be at home with his wife, backfired. The dutiful soldier *did not go down* to his house. Instead, in solidarity with his fellow soldiers, he slept with the servants on the steps. He *did not go down*... [4]

This is written four times! Uriah was honorable and faithful while David was not.

The failed cover-up called for a more permanent solution to the problem. David enlisted Joab to work further on fixing this by sending Uriah to the front lines where he could be easily killed. The king cruelly instructed, “Step back and let it happen.”

One thing leads to another! Narcissism and entitlement lead to dissatisfaction, coveting, violence, murder, and cover-up.

Centuries later, we know that bullies abound.

Earlier this year, Elgin Community College hosted a series called “Targets of Hate.” One of the speakers, Lark Cowart, a former Kane County state’s attorney who has prosecuted many bullying cases and abuse cases, spoke about grown-up bullies and social and workplace harassment.

Most of us are aware that childhood bullies whose behavior goes unchecked can grow to be rude and abusive adults. “Adults don’t like to talk about bullying,” Cowart pointed out. “Instead, it is called *rudeness*.” [5]

Power imbalance and cultural acceptance can play a part in adult bullying. And Cowart shared a stunning statistic: One in five adults admit to being a bully! This growing culture of rudeness/bullying is critical because such behavior is contagious and destructive.

Everyone suffers: When we are treated badly, we treat others badly ... work, grades, and relationships suffer. It is hard to maintain friendships. [5]

In bullying, there is **the Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander**.

Joab was an officer, a close confidant of David's. Part of his job was to help the king fix his messes. Sometimes we are accomplices to those with bad behavior. We enable in order to keep the peace and to save our skin. Joab was the kind of **bystander who stands by the bully**.

Nathan the prophet was **a different kind of bystander. He stood by the bullied**. He took the risk and told a parable about a rich man who TOOK a poor man's sweet little lamb. The rich man had everything but he was not satisfied. So he TOOK what was not his. David, having seemingly recovered from his crimes, condemned the rich man in the story, even calling for his death!

Nathan's indictment is the second two-word (in Hebrew) summary in the story:
"You are the man."

This past week a letter came to me from the Bishop's office. A pastor I have known for many years has resigned from the ELCA Roster of Ministers of Word and Sacrament. The resignation came after the bishop confronted the pastor with multiple, consistent, and credible complaints from congregation members and coworkers of personally intimidating or sexually inappropriate humor and conversation.

"His behavior was hostile to our values and incompatible with the character of the ministerial office." Bishop Miller closed the letter by asking for prayer for all who have been affected by this behavior and for the former pastor and his family ... "so that we may seek healing and reconciliation in the face of our human brokenness."

The Church has a long history of being blind to bad behavior, being in denial, and covering up. Those days have to be over.

David was confronted about his actions with a parable. Like with the parables of Jesus, he came to his own correct conclusion. And he added his own two-word (in Hebrew) summary: *"I have sinned!"*

The great king fell off his high and mighty throne of entitlement on to the floor of confession. He depended on the STEADFAST LOVE that was promised, on MERCY.

Like the screenwriters in 1951 who completely changed the story of David and Bathsheba, there are times we change the story of our lives or the story of someone else to make it more appealing, to make it less terrible. We ignore and cover up ... give explanations and make excuses.

The ancient story pulls us to the mirror of moral reflection. The story urges us to discern misguided misuses of power and privilege. Where do we fit in? Are we the Bully? The Bullied? The Bystander? And how are we a reflection of God's justice?

It seems to me that one of the huge gifts in our life together here at St. Mark's is that, as we gather together for worship and learning, serving and caring, *we strengthen our gifts of discernment.*

We build courage to speak up for ourselves when we are wronged.

And we build courage to confess when we are wrong.

We build the confidence to speak for others who need a voice.

And to speak out against persons and systems that diminish the lives and light of others.

As Lutherans, we recognize that acting justly within the home, the church, society and civic life for the good of all is one of the vocations to which God calls all people.” [3]

And so, the sordid and sorrowful story of David and Bathsheba will continue to stand as written. And as it does, it continues to call for courage—to challenge, to confess, and to change.

Amen.

Resources:

[1] Gafney, Wil, “Commentary on 2 Samuel 11:1-15,” [workingpreacher.org](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2535), July 26, 2015.

[2] “Draft Social Statement on Women and Justice,” ELCA Task Force on Justice, November 2017, page 1. <https://www.elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Current-Social-Writing-Projects/Women-and-Justice/Draft>

[3] “Draft Social Statement,” page 3.

[4] Brueggemann, Walter, *1 & 2 Samuel*.

[5] Krishnamurthy, Madhu, “Former prosecutor says 1 in 5 adults is a bully,” *The Daily Herald*, March 22, 2018. <https://www.dailyherald.com/news/20180322/former-prosecutor-says-1-in-5-adults-is-a-bully>

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