

“The Challenge of Looking in the Mirror”

**Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood**

**Sunday, June 12, 2016
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost**

Readings from Scripture: 2 Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13 and Luke 7:36-8:1

When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. 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, 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. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; 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 the meager fare, and drink from his cup and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. 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.” 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; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.”

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; 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. 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. 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.”

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.” The Lord struck the child that Uriah’s wife bore to David, and it became very ill.

2 Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13

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. And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that Jesus was eating in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. 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. 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.” Jesus spoke up and said to him, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” “Teacher,” he replied, “Speak.” “A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?” Simon

answered , “I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt.” And Jesus said to him, “You have judged rightly.” 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. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. 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.” Then he said to her, “Your sins are forgiven.” But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” And he said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you, go in peace.”

Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God.

Luke 7:36-8:1

Will you pray with me? O Holy God, you offer us your word for both nourishment and challenge. Be with us now as we listen and reflect upon what you have invited me to preach this day. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

As I reflected on these passages side-by-side, I was struck by the parallels, both leaders, King David and Simon, are challenged by prophetic voices. They are confronted by their sin through a parable-type story, and their responses, David to the man in the story, and Simon toward Jesus and the woman in his home, are responses of judgment. But the stories end differently. David acknowledges his sin and seeks forgiveness from God. But we never really know Simon's full response. So I want to begin with the story about David and give you some background about what led to this confrontation.

King David and his armies are at war and his best military men are away at battle. One day he sees a woman from afar, the one we come to know as Bathsheba. He knows that she is the wife of one of his favored and trusted military advisors. Yet he sends for her anyway. And as he is the king, she has no say in the matter and in time she is with child. Now David panics because he knows her husband is away at war and he will be found out. But he devises a plan. He sends for Uriah, her husband, to come for some military consultants. David encourages Uriah when he comes to visit his wife. But Uriah will not do it. David gets him full of wine and he still will not do it. Uriah insists on following the protocol that one does not lie with one's wife while at war, and he will not go. So now David is really in a panic and he devises an even more destructive plan. He sends Uriah to the front lines of a dangerous battle. Uriah and the other military leaders know it's odd, but he is his king and his honors his orders and in due time Uriah is killed. David is both devastated and relieved. Bathsheba goes into mourning for her husband. David waits an appropriate time and then he marries Bathsheba. He deceives himself thinking his secret is safe, the issue is off the radar and no one will be the wiser.

But that is not the case. God knows and God sends Nathan to confront him. Now Nathan is quite aware that King David can be kind of testy at times, so instead of directly confronting him, he tells him a story. We hear about one of David's citizens who uses his power to abuse another. We, as the reader, know what is unfolding but David seems oblivious. When Nathan gets to the part about the rich man taking advantage of the poor one, David explodes. He acts as the judge and jury and demands that the man be punished. It is then that Nathan confronts him with the truth--that David took advantage of another with his power and David is aware and repents and is deeply remorseful.

So what leads David to do something like this? Is it a mid-life crisis, the sense that he is no longer the young and brave man who conquered Goliath? Has he become so filled with power as the king and has a sense of entitlement so he thinks he can do whatever he wants? Or is it that King David is tired of war and wants a diversion? We really don't know. We can only imagine. What is made clear to King David is that he acted on

his desires without thinking of the consequences. And now he is face to face with the results of his destructive behavior. He took advantage of his powers and caused the death of a man, treated a woman as a piece of property and broke her marriage vows. But David is also a man of faith, and he knows that he is accountable to God and he acknowledges that he has sinned. Filled with remorse he implores God to be forgiven. Nathan tells him there are things that have been done that cannot be undone, but he also tells him that God forgives him.

So we contrast this with the story from the Gospel, the familiar one of the sinful woman who comes and anoints Jesus' feet and we learn that there is a story behind the story. We are told that the woman who is considered a sinner suddenly arrives and begins to anoint Jesus feet with her hair. She washes his feet off and dries them with her tears. Jesus doesn't rebuke her or tell her to stop, but Simon, the host, is very offended. Offended that Jesus let her touch him, much less with her hands and her hair; offended that Jesus did not rebuke this known sinner; offended at her generous spirit. So the tensions in that room are high. Scholar, Ken Bailey, explores this passage with the wisdom of one who has lived in the Middle East. He presents some likely background information. He believes that this woman had heard about Jesus and heard his message of forgiveness and healing. Secondly, she knew that Jesus was going to be at Simon's home for dinner and she wants to see him. Surprisingly, we learn from Bailey, it's not unusual for outcasts or poor people to show up. He said that in those days when someone had a banquet in their home, outcasts would sit along the wall and await the leftover food. Both sides benefitted; the host was seen as generous in sharing food with those in need and hungry people were fed. But something unexpected happens that night. Jesus is intentionally humiliated. You see, Simon did not perform any of the traditional rituals that are offered to guests. No water to cleanse his dusty feet, no oils, no welcoming kiss. Bailey's theory is not that she was coming to ask for forgiveness, but to express her gratitude for knowing that God's forgiveness and grace was for her, too.

But now she has seen how Jesus has been treated. So she takes on the traditional role of host. Her tears are used for water. Her kisses of welcome are given freely. And the ointment that normally would have been rubbed on his hands is poured over his head. Everything she does is an act of hospitality lived out in gratitude. By her actions the host has been challenged for his rudeness. As readers we are told what he is thinking, about his response to Jesus and the woman. We know that all Simon does is stand in judgment. Jesus senses what's going on and he lays the groundwork to challenge him. First, as usual, he tells a parable ending with a question. And Simon responds correctly. And then Jesus turns the situation around. He says, *Simon, you're the one who is lacking. You lack hospitality, you lack welcome, you lack compassion and love.* And then Jesus turns to the woman and offers her words of forgiveness and peace.

Yet we find that even after that confrontation with Simon, the other guests, religious leaders, literally sit in judgment. In fact, that's why they are there in the first place. Sort of a set-up to see how this young prophet would act. We are told that those at the table question his actions toward the woman. Unlike David, all of them refuse or are unable to see their own sins or lack of compassion. In fact we don't even really know what Simon's final response is, either. But maybe that's because we are supposed to consider the times when we sit in judgment.

These stories reminded me that all too often sin and judgmentalism are found in tandem with each other. If we are honest, we are more than willing to judge others than to examine our own shortcomings. I think there are many reasons for that. For some of us we can only feel good about ourselves if we put others down. Sometimes we are so afraid of making a mistake, we refuse to do what is right and become guilty of the sin of omission. Sometimes we may abuse the power we have, at other times, when we are confronted with our own inactions or our sins, instead of admitting our responsibility, we say it was an accident or we blame someone else.

Consider the story this week of a young man named Brock Turner and the results of his trial that exploded on social media. He was sentenced to six months in jail following a violent attack on a woman near the Stanford Campus. He was found guilty and received a six-month term that will probably be cut in half. There were a number of people who blamed the woman because she, like he, had become drunk. I saw the parallels to event in Simon's home. A woman came seeking something, she came seeking justice. But instead she received judgment. The lack of accountability on the part of the perpetrator was troubling and unsettling for many people. My only hope is that the expressions of support by so many people will be a source of grace for her in the days to come.

In the conversations about sin and judgment, fear and lack of trust come together. It is clear that we are more comfortable sitting in judgment than confessing our sins and receiving God's grace. But if we look at the original meanings of the words in Greek and Hebrew, we understand that the original meaning of the word "sin" was about missing the mark. It was about turning away. It is about being less than our best selves. It is about turning away from the right path. Confessing our sins is not about laying ourselves before God as examples of human depravity. It is about finding another way, about being accountable, about healing our relationships with others and our very selves. It is about healing our relationship with God.

King David accepted accountability. He spoke the truth aloud and repented with a remorseful heart. He cannot undo the damage he has done but he can move forward with a more faithful and contrite heart, more aware of his abuse of power, more aware of the ways in which he had become unfaithful and more aware of his love of God. The woman in the Gospel has heard about the gifts of grace and healing and responds with deep gratitude. The good news has set her free. And so may it be for us. Acknowledging our sins is not about staying stuck in the past, but opening the door to a new future. It's a call to strengthen our faith and our relationship with God and those we love and with our very selves as we come back to the right path. We are reminded by the life and ministry of Jesus Christ that there is, indeed, a wideness in God's mercy. Thanks be to God.