

## 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

**II Samuel 11:26-12:13a; Psalm 51:1-12; John 6:24-35; Ephesians 4:1-16.**

**II Samuel 11:26-12:13a** is the account in which Nathan the prophet calls King David to accountability for the murder of Uriah and the rape of Bathsheba. He makes that call through his telling of a parable of a poor man and his one lamb taken by a rich man for a feast. David is convicted by Nathan's disclosure that David is the rich man of his story, and he repents of his sin. But the author is careful to note in 12:13-15 that although God forgives the king, David's action cannot be rescinded but instead sets into motion inevitable consequences that cannot be averted, even though forgiveness occurs. It is therefore a reminder of the consequences of sin.

The story begins with the frank words, "But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord, and the Lord sent Nathan to David" (12:1). Following Uriah's murder, David married Bathsheba, thus thinking he had effectively covered up his rape of her and his elimination of her uncooperative husband. But God determined otherwise. God brings David to judgment through God's prophet, Nathan, who tells David of a rich man who, although having many sheep, took the one lamb of a poor man and butchered it for a feast. David speaks judgment against that rich man, never realizing he is speaking judgment against himself.

"As the Lord lives," David declares, "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" (12:6). Little did the king realize that in these very words, he was condemning himself.

In this statement, David does not condemn the man to death; that is not his sentence. He simply says that he deserves to die! But the actual verdict is that he will restore the lamb fourfold. This was the standard restitution for stolen sheep, according to Exodus 22:1. A person who steals or kills another person's sheep must make restitution fourfold. This is, in reality, what David does actually pay. He had Uriah murdered (which would be considered the greater of the two crimes the king committed). The restitution David made for his murder of Uriah was the death of the first son of Bathsheba and David (12:14-18), and of his other sons Ammon (13:28-29), Absalom (18:14-15) and Adonijah (I Kings 2:24-25)!

Nathan speaks God's punishment of David. And it is both a terrible and an eminently just punishment. "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. Thus says the Lord: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbors, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun." (12:9b-12). Thus Nathan prophesies of what will befall David and his dynasty because of his action with Bathsheba and Uriah. This, then, becomes the base for the plot of chapters 13 through 18 of II Samuel, as this tragedy plays itself out.

"The sword shall never depart from your house" (12:10). As Uriah was killed by violence, so will the house of David be plagued with violence, both in his own lifetime and through its many

centuries of rule over Judah. David's favored son, Absalom will kill his brother Amnon (13:28-29), David's commanding general Joab will kill Absalom (18:13-15), and Solomon, once coming to power, would order the deaths of his brother and rival Adonijah (I Kings 2:24-25) and of Joab (I Kings 2:29-34). David's killing of Uriah would begin a blood bath that would span the centuries of Israel's royal family.

"I will take your wives to your neighbors, and they shall lie with them in the sight of this very sun" (12:11). Thus, David raped Bathsheba in secret and sought to keep it secret even in the face of her pregnancy. But David's wives and concubines would be raped in broad daylight and before the eyes of all Israel by David's son, Absalom and his fellow rebels (16:20-23). And David's son, Amnon, would rape his own sister, Tamar (13:1-22). Thus, as Nathan predicted, "You did this thing secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun" (12:12). Violence – whether killing or sexual – will only beget violence!

The question can be asked whether the Bible is here teaching that David's sons, Amnon and Absalom, were condemned by their father's behavior to lives of inevitable rapacity, violence and rebellion. Were they predestined to be pawns in this saga? The scripture does not suggest this. Rather, Amnon, Absalom and Adonijah are all willing participants in their use of power for their own purposes. In this sense, they were more than willing students of their father. "Like David, his sons claim the right to whatever they want when they want it. Like David, their treatment of women brings them great trouble (13:1-29; 18:9-15; I Kings 2:13-25). Like David, his sons are ultimately responsible for their actions."<sup>1</sup>

**Psalm 51:1-12** is the psalm that is traditionally attributed to David as his prayer when the prophet Nathan exposed to him his sins of the rape of Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah. The opening lines of the psalm set its theme:

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin" (vss. 1-2).

The writer acknowledges his sinfulness – both the evil he has done and his very inheritance of sin. He is guilty of both the most heinous actions but it is true as well that his very nature is corrupted by original sin. The psalmist develops this thoroughly in the next lines of the psalm.

"For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me" (vss. 3-5).

But even though so thoroughly saturated by sin, the psalmist calls on God to both forgive him and to cleanse him of his sin. For it is in God that one can find both mercy and release from his sin. "You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Grizzard, "II Samuel", *The New Interpreters' Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), p. 456.

and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out my iniquities” (vss. 6-9).

It is significant, in this passage, that the Psalmist doesn’t see God as simply a loving parent who overlooks and forgives the wrongdoing of his children. There are consequences to this sin: a sense of spiritual pollution, a “crushing of one’s bones” (i.e., very tangible consequences – in David’s case, the death of the baby born to Bathsheba and the subsequent deaths of his children), and the fact that such sin has so broken relationship with God that it is as if God has hid his face from this sinner.

Thus, what this sinner wants from God is most eloquently stated. “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit” (vss. 10-12).

It is not simply forgiveness for which this psalmist begs. He wants to be spiritually transformed – redeemed as well as forgiven. He wants to be made into the kind of person God created him to be. He wants his relationship with God restored; he doesn’t want to be ostracized from God. Recognizing the horrible price he has paid for his sins of lust and domination, he prays, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit”. He wants to return to a relationship with God – not simply the relationship he willingly abandoned to accomplish his own ends, but a chastened and humbled relationship where he is restored – much wiser because he is much more broken!

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**John 6:24-35** presents the first of seven<sup>2</sup> “I Am” statements by Jesus (“I am the bread of life”), testimonies to his personhood and mission that build directly upon the Jews’ name for God (see the previous Sunday’s gospel lectionary exposition). It is made within the context of the reflection through which Jesus is leading the Israelites as a result of their response to his miraculous feeding of the 5,000 (6:1-15).

“Very truly I tell you,” Jesus states to the crowd, “you are looking for me, not because you saw signs (of the kingdom of God), but because you ate your fill of the loaves. (Well,) do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For it is on him that God the Father has set his seal” (6:26-27).

Jesus is the bread of life – the One who can sustain the Jews with “food that endures for eternal life” (not immortality or a future life in heaven, but living fully now and forever in the unending presence of God and of Jesus’ community). But the crowds don’t want the ongoing sustenance of Jesus as bread and wine. Rather, they yearn only for handouts. They want the physical bread and fish Jesus provides for them in miraculous feedings, and their faith goes no further than that.

To their obtuseness and unwillingness to want nothing more from life than a free meal, Jesus responds with his first direct “I Am” statement, “I am the Bread of Life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (6:35).

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<sup>2</sup> The seven “I Am” statements are 6:35; 8:12; 9:5; 10:7-14; 11:25; 14:6 and 15:1-15.

Bread and drink are essential for the sustaining of life. Here, Jesus is saying that he is sufficient bread and drink for the community he is founding, and in fact, for all the world that embraces his Lordship. Jesus is sufficient for every individual; he is sufficient for the community that will bear his name; and the kingdom of justice, equitability in wealth and a relational faith is sufficient for all the kingdoms of the world – if they will but accept and embrace him.

Jesus is sufficient “bread and drink”. He is the new “manna” given by God – even more miraculous than the manna given by God through Moses in the desert (6:32-34). Jesus is all-sufficient for the Christian and his/her community. And that total sufficiency of Christ is captured in the celebration of the Eucharist, because it is only in this sacrament that Christ is profoundly broken and his blood shed for the redemption of the world (6:52-59). Thus, by definition, this healing sacrament that connects us to Christ and communicates his all-sufficiency for us, can only be celebrated together within Jesus’ new community – the Church.

**Ephesians 4:1-16** presents Paul’s proposed battle plan for winning Rome and the world to Christ.

How should God’s people respond to a Roman Empire that is intent upon destroying the church? The way to deal with such an empire, Paul teaches the church in the book of Ephesians, is neither to flee from it nor to make itself invisible. It is to directly engage it and work for its conversion into the Jewish-Christian dream of the shalom community. And the reason why this is the church’s task is because this is what the gospel is all about.

The first three chapters of Ephesians present Paul’s theological rationale for such a proactive stance toward Rome. Now, beginning with chapter four, Paul places hands and feet on his theology. In this section that we begin this Sunday, Paul presents his practical strategy for the church working toward the transformation of the Roman Empire. And he begins that presentation by stating his primary battle plan! That presentation begins with the first seven verses of the fourth chapter of Ephesians.

“I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift!”

What stands out the strongest in the first three verses is the intense relationality of the words he has chosen. He doesn’t begin his plan for winning Rome with words about strategy or tactics or action. Instead, he speaks of the mobilized church needing to be a relational church. The words he uses are all relational: “beg”, “lead a life worthy of your calling”, exercise in your ministry “humility”, “gentleness”, “patience”, “bearing with one another in love”, “making every effort to maintain unity”, “practice the bond of peace”! If the church is going to successfully work to transform the public life of Rome or any other nation or people, Paul is telling us, it can do so

only if it is unified. And you can't be a truly unified people unless you actively seek to build your faith community as a relational body – a relational culture.

Paul then goes on to argue the theological case for unity in verses 4-6. He names seven (the perfect number) beliefs of the church that drives it toward unity. They are “one body (of Christ)”, accessing “one Spirit”, called to “one hope”. The Christians worship “one Lord”, practice “one faith”, observe “one baptism”, and are joined together by “one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all”. Because God is unified, Paul is stating, the church's very faith must be unified. If we all hold to a common Lord and become one body together, then our differences are as nothing, for our commonality in Christ must overwhelm all our disagreements in theology, polity or liturgics.

What Paul is stressing here, as the very premise upon which Rome can be engaged and won for Christ is that the church cannot effectively work to transform public life if it is not unified in every way. A fighting or arguing church will reach no person or system with the gospel (4:1-6). Thus, Paul is here recognizing that church-based power has to be relational power, not unilateral power. In seeking to win the empire to Christ, the church will be exercising power. But the kind of power it *must* exercise is relational power.

I define power as the capacity, ability and willingness to act. Any individual, community or organization can act powerfully if it has developed its capacity, ability and willingness to act. But most governments, mega-businesses and giant religions act unilaterally in the exercise of their capacity, ability and willingness. That is, they use power as “power over”, power as “command-and-control”. They act from the “top-down” and tell you how to think or act or behave.

That won't work for the church, Paul is saying, because that goes against everything that Christ ever was and how he chose to act. Jesus used power relationally. He built up people. He rescued people. And he motivated them to become what they had the potential to be. Thus, Paul realizes that the church's use of power to seek the transformation of the world must be relational power, and come out of a caring, committed and unified body.

Our task, Paul is saying to the first-century Christians, is to use Christ's relational power to battle the unilateral, dominating, controlling power of Rome. It is only the tight knit nature of our relational power that will enable us to be conquerors. If we stoop to using unilateral power, then we will have been converted by Rome rather than we converting Rome!

Built upon the foundation of the exercise of relational power by a unified Church, Paul then moves on to present his basic battle plan. “Each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ” (4:7, 11-12).<sup>3</sup> We are all one people under Christ, Paul reminded us in

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<sup>3</sup> I have eliminated verses 8-10 from this text because Paul digressed from his main argument in those three verses. His words, “Christ's gift” in verse 7 reminded him of a well-known Christian hymn of that time, and he quotes from that hymn (“When he ascended on high, he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people”) that was taken from Psalm 68:18. That, in turn, causes Paul to begin speculating on a controversial doctrine of that time also

earlier verses, knit together as one body, unified by one Lord, one faith, one baptism, committed to one Lord. But for what purpose have we been made one in Christ? It is in order for us to exercise the unique gifts each of us has been given by God to contribute to the building up of that one body and reaching the Roman Empire (and the world) for Christ.

Paul has stressed throughout his ministry his belief that God has purposely placed in the church a diversity of gifts so that the body of Christ is fully served and is equipped for mission (e.g., Rom. 12:4-8; I Cor. 12:12-27). But here in Ephesians 4:11-12, Paul takes his thinking considerably further.

God has given to the church particular leadership gifts that are to be exercised by specific people. Those gifts (and, consequently, those people) are those of apostleship, prophetic ministries, evangelism, pastoring and teaching (vs. 11). What is the “job” of these “apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers”? *The mistranslation of the sentence that follows has had a profound impact on the church of the past 350 years – an intent Paul never intended!*

Consider two distinct translations of Ephesians 6:11-12.

“And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelist; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ”. (The King James Version)

“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ might be built up” (The New International Version).

The translation of Eph. 6:11-12 as found in the King James Version (KJV) tells the reader that the work of these named leaders is threefold: to “perfect the saints”, to “do the work of ministry” and to “edify the Church”. The translation of the same passage in the New International Version (NIV) suggests something entirely different, however. It states quite clearly that the leaders’ work is singular: to prepare God’s people for the people’s works of service, and in this way, the church is built up.

These two translations present two distinct ways of understanding “church”. If you hold to the KJV’s translation, then you would carry out ministry with the understanding that it is the job of the clergy to “perfect” the Christians, “do the work of ministry” and “edify the church”. The clergy have the responsibility of doing the work of the church; the laity is there to listen and obey. That is, the clergy would be the producers and the laity would be consumers.

But if one holds to the NIV’s translation, an entirely different understanding of church emerges. The NIV is suggesting that the clergy would prepare the laity to do the work of the church in the world, and the laity would do it. Or, to put it another way, the clergy would prepare the laity for being the church in public life, and the laity would be engaged daily in being the church in the public life of the world!

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mentioned in the Apostles Creed (“he descended into hell”) and alluded to in I Peter 3:18-20. It is at this point that Paul realizes how badly he has gotten off the subject, and suddenly in verse 11, turns back to his main theme.

Which translation is right? This is a crucial question to answer, because the entire way of understanding the work of the church in the world is at stake. The answer to that question lies in the original Greek. And when you consult the original Greek, there is no question which translation is correct.

The Greek has two words that can be translated “to” or “for”. One means “in order to” do something; the other means “so that” something can happen – two very distinct meanings. Both of these Greek words are used in this verse, and it is imperative that each be translated correctly in order to capture what it is that Paul is stating in this passage.

If the two Greek words are correctly translated, here’s what you will get: “He gave some to be apostles, some (to be) prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers *in order to* prepare God’s people for their work of service *so that* the Body of Christ might be built up”. Which is the correct translation? The NIV (as well as the New Revised Standard Version, the English Standard Version, and the New Living Translation)! Intriguingly, the latest re-translation of the King James Version (the New KJV) corrects Ephesians 4:11-12 to conform to the other dominant English translations of the scripture.

Why is it important to reflect on this mistranslation of this text and the damage it has caused the church over the past 350 years before it began to be corrected by a plethora of contemporary translations? This mistranslation appearing in 1611 enabled a clergy-dominated church to justify that domination as it stressed the role of the clergy (“apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers”) as those who implemented the ministry of the church with the laity assuming the roles of consumers and supporters of the status quo. The result was the separation of Christian faith from everyday life and work, leaving the management of the church in the hands of its clergy. It is significant, for example, that virtually all major Christian-based social reform in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in Great Britain and the United States came from independent laity-based social action organizations that were forced to operate outside the church and were often condemned by the church as exercising Christianity in an unapproved and unacceptable manner.

What Paul is actually presenting in this section is his essential battle-plan. He is teaching that the way the church will transform the public arena of Rome or of any other nation or people is if its’ leaders (“apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers”) commit themselves to equipping and enabling the entire body of Christ and each Christian to be effectively engaged in public life. Thus, clergy exist less to *do* ministry than to *prepare Christians to do public ministry!*

In other words, what Paul is saying is that the church should not so much be a sanctuary to which Christians flee when life tumbles in on them, as it should be a school. It should not so much be a fellowship station as it should be a training and planning station to take your community for Christ and his kingdom! The church is the seminary that prepares its laity for Christian engagement in the world!

The implications of Paul’s insight, if authentically practiced in the church today, are significant. One implication would be that the majority of the effort of the church’s members would not go into sustaining the church as an organization or an institution, but in addressing the substantive

issues of its society, holding government and business leaders accountable, and being engaged all over that community in shaping its public life. Another implication is that the church would be “dark” during the week because all its action would be happening out in the schools, in the courtrooms, in City Council chambers and in businesses.

Paul then concludes his presentation of his strategy for taking Rome for Christ. He writes, “We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love” (4:14-16).

What would it do for the church, if the church were to take Paul’s battle-plan seriously, and make it what the church needs to be all about? According to 4:14-16, the result will be a congregation that – as a congregation – is really able to engage its society and work for substantive change while being clear about its vision for the world and the church. Such a church will become virile, healthy, united, effective and – most of all – obedient to God’s call to truly be the church as God created it to return the world to what God intends society, humanity and the environment to be all about!

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