

Great Ends of the Church II: The Preservation of the Truth
Based on 2 Sam 12: 1-7a and 1 Thess 5: 4-11
Rev. Dr. Nicole Wilkinson
Cape May Presbyterian Church
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It's unfortunate, or maybe the grace of God, that your bulletins list the first scripture reading as from chapter 11 of 2 Samuel. My mistake, since I handed the reference on to Nancy that way, though what I wanted was what the lay reader just read, the first seven verses from chapter 12. In chapter 11, David is thoughtlessly plunging ahead to get what he wants and get away with it. Bathsheba, Uriah, Joab, they are just objects he moves around on a chessboard, in a game he really can't lose, since he's the king.

By the latter half of that chapter, David is, in his own mind, solving his problem. The problem he created, the problem you might say he procreated. Bathsheba, whom at this point he has only wanted and ordered for himself, like pizza, but whom he does seem later in the story to come to love, at this point Bathsheba is having David's baby. That's great news for a king, right? Heirs to the throne and all that. One little wrinkle in the good news is Bathsheba's husband, Uriah. So David has Uriah killed, under cover of war, sending him with that purpose to the forefront of battle.

David's culture is one very, *very* concerned that every woman's every child should be the child of her husband. David has disregarded that concern, broken the law, potentially shamed Bathsheba and her husband, Uriah, and even put Bathsheba's life at risk. A woman convicted of sleeping with a man not her husband—willingly—was guilty of a capital offense, subject to stoning. By the way, was she willing? Hard to tell. David is the king, supposedly God's servant. Could Bathsheba have said no, if she wanted to--if she had a chance? We cannot know. Because David quite literally has all the power. Bathsheba's willingness is very much beside the point, painfully so. David has no regard for Bathsheba's personhood, nor for that of her husband. He picks up Bathsheba and throws Uriah away, and sleeps like a baby.

That's why the prophet Nathan comes to talk to him, in chapter 12. Because David has done some very bad things in chapter 11 and seems to have zero awareness, zero remorse. David has a lot of power, and he has committed powerful sins. He has used his power, as military commander, as king, not in the interests of his people—which is what that power is for--but in the interests of getting what he wants and getting away with it. It's a familiar story, in that sense.

The striking thing about this part of the story, chapter 12, is not what David has done, but how completely unaware he is of having done it. Nathan tells him a story, once upon a time, there was a greedy man, who had everything he could ever want, lots of herds and flocks, but instead of being satisfied, the greedy man stole another man's one and only prized possession, his pet lamb.

Bathsheba is the lamb, presumably. A possession, albeit a prized, beloved one. David's crime in sleeping with her is seen in Natha's story as some kind of theft. Thank you, prophet Nathan, for

that confirmation that women were in fact often seen as property in ancient law and custom. And the story doesn't totally match David's life story. It's strange-- instead of killing the man he stole from, which is what David does in real life, the greedy man kills the lamb he stole. Bathsheba, it seems, takes the hit that the real life David gives to Uriah.

But Nathan knows his audience. Whatever the story's weaknesses as a morality tale or an allegory, David is nevertheless completely sucked in by it and does not at all recognize it as a fictional story. As thoughtless and impulsive as ever, David passes sentence on the man Nathan has made up, the greedy man in the story. That's terrible, David shouts, that cruel man deserves to die! Right, Nathan says, but you are that cruel man. You are the criminal, the sinner, the one lacking compassion. That's the truth in the story. That cruelty doesn't have to come from a person who is evil from birth. Cruelty can happen when any one is thoughtless enough for long enough. Out of touch with the consequences of their own actions, out of touch with what is true, for just a little too long.

Like David, we have days, weeks, decades, when we lose touch with what is true about our own lives. When we see terrible crimes being committed but remain comfortably oblivious to our own part in their commission.

Some sociologist, I think, once said, "We know what we are doing, but we don't know what 'what we are doing' does." We know our own intentions and our own actions, but we are not always aware, maybe we're never fully aware, of how our actions affect the world around us.

The writer of the Great Ends of the Church tells us that one of the reasons that the church exists is the preservation of the truth. And I have to say that in 2022, that seems like a very critical part of our job. As the church, as followers of Jesus, we reject the idea that there are alternative facts. We believe and affirm that there is such a thing as truth and that the truth demands attention, that avoiding or distorting the truth will end badly. It matters, whether something is true or false.

So I am deeply grateful that the Book of Order reminds us that the truth is part of our purpose. But I am not sure our job is to *preserve* it, as much as to *pursue* it. Because with the humbling experience of the last 112 years behind us, I hope we have figured out that we don't own the truth, in order to preserve it—as though we kept it under glass in a museum. Rather, we glimpse the truth, and are well advised to keep on trying to get a clearer view.

In Paul's letter to the church at Thessalonika, he urges them to do just this. He warns the Thessalonians that as human beings, we are always prone to sleepiness and drunkenness when it comes to our perception of the world around us, our perceptions of reality. We have to be reminded regularly to stay awake, to be aware, to be amenable to the daylight where nothing can stay hidden for very long.

In 1910, when the Great Ends of the Church were written, the world was already changing very rapidly. I wonder if the writer of this Great End thought that the church could somehow stem the tide? If so, it didn't work. The changes keep happening—the airplane, the flu, the light switch-- in the culture as well as in our technology and way of life. And we need to rejoice at many of those changes. In 1909, 70 people were lynched in the US—two or three of them were white, four or five of them were African American women.

On a much lighter note, there's a scene from the Golden Girls where Blanche says that she misses how things were for women in the good ol' days of chivalry, when men held the door for women and tipped their hats and kissed their hands. And Dorothy snaps back, "well, how far back do you want to go, Blanche, I mean do you still want to be able to vote?" We need to ask those kinds of questions when we find ourselves waxing nostalgic about the past. The truth isn't something we once knew and have a tendency to forget. It's a point of orientation that we cannot always see, like the North Star.

In the early 1900s, after all, sermons were preached against interracial relationships and in favor of a woman's unconditional subjugation to her husband. Looking back, we can see that the truth has not changed since those times. But our priorities as a nation and our perspective on the truth changed, allowing new aspects of the truth to emerge as obvious, thank the Lord.

When I was in graduate school, struggling to make my dissertation committee happy while also trying to write something I felt was important, I came across the quote from Alfred Loisy that is on your bulletins.¹ "Life is short," Loisy wrote, "and when one senses one's own to be eminently fragile, one perhaps has the right to say, without too much delay, that which one believes to have grasped of the truth." Yes. There are so many things that ring true to me about that. First of all, the urgency. It's important to tell the truth because life is short; too short for subterfuge and lying and hiding ourselves from one another. Life is too short for nonsense and self deception. But even more, I love the humility in the way Loisy phrases it. He doesn't say "when we arrive at our great knowledge, the revelation, or even the certainty of what is true." He says that we should be permitted to express, "that which we believe we have grasped of the truth." We might be wrong, what we have hold of may not be true at all. And even if our piece of truth is right, it will never be the whole picture. Nevertheless, there is such a thing as truth, and we do get to get a hold of a bit of it, once in a while, by the grace of God. If we stay awake, if we hear the voices of our prophets, the morals of our stories. We get to touch the truth and proclaim it, if, as a church, we commit ourselves to pursuing it.

¹ Alfred Loisy was a Catholic priest and biblical scholar, 1857-1940, remembered as the father of Modernism in the Roman Catholic Church.