

GOD'S JUSTIFICATION

II Samuel 12:1-15

REFORMATION SUNDAY

October 28, 2018

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Last year, we Lutherans celebrated the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's posting of the 95 Theses, that set off what historians have called the Protestant Reformation.

This year, things are back to normal.

Since the founding of the ELCA by merger in 1988, 30 years ago, the Church has toned down the 'celebration' of Reformation Sunday for ecumenical reasons.

Pastors and Worship Teams, instead, can choose the texts and prayers for the 23rd Sunday of Pentecost.

Before accusing me of playing down Reformation Sunday, in good Lutheran order, I will make my confession first.

Last Sunday, I only made it through the first half of the Narrative Lectionary's assigned reading on David and Bathsheba.

Noting my preoccupation with the sins of Israel's greatest king, I closed my message with the promise I would take up the rest of the text when David is confronted by the courageous court prophet, Nathan.

By the way, I think it is an appropriate Reformation Sunday text, so I have titled this sermon "God's Justification," to go along with proper Lutheran hymns, prayers, and a baptism.

For those who weren't present last Sunday, let me summarize one of the most scandalous passages in the Bible.

We met David as he was strolling on his palace roof garden, spying a very beautiful Bathsheba bathing *a fresco*.

Despite learning that she was the wife of Uriah the Hittite, David still sent for her, slept with her, and impregnated her.

Uriah the Hittite was a soldier on the front lines of battle, where David, as King, should have been also.

When David was told by Bathsheba, "I am pregnant," he called Uriah back from the battlefield to get an update on the army's progress,

He assumed Uriah would sleep with his wife, removing any question of the child's paternity.

However, Uriah was a loyal and faithful soldier, and declared he wouldn't go inside his home and be with his wife as long as his comrades-in-arms were still out in the field.

For David, this was "a fly in the ointment!"

So, David wrote a letter to his longtime friend and General, Joab, and told him to:

***“Put Uriah in the front line where the fighting is the fiercest.
Then withdraw from him so he will be struck down and die.”***

As planned, Uriah was killed in battle.

Do you know who Uria the Hittite was?

When, as a young man, David was a fugitive in the wilderness, being hunted down by a crazed King Saul, a group of friends risked their lives to save David.

One of those friends was Uriah the Hittite.

Today’s text begins with the simple statement:

“and the Lord sent Nathan to David” (v.1).

As I mentioned earlier, Nathan was a court prophet.

And, because God sent Nathan before David, we would expect a more thunderous confrontation.

Instead, Nathan says he wants to talk to David about a case between a rich man and a poor man.

This makes sense, because in ancient Israel, the king served as the judge and ruler on cases.

So, David sat and listened to Nathan, assuming that this was just another case for him to hear.

Nathan cited the case of a rich man with many flocks and herds, and a poor man with only one little lamb.

That lamb was like a family member, sleeping in her master’s arms at night.

The rich man received a traveler, and, to show great hospitality without much expense, he takes the poor man’s lamb and has it killed and served for his visitor’s dinner.

Then Nathan asks David what should be done to the rich man.

Rightfully and according to Mosaic Law, David rules that the man must pay four times over.

But the other things he says are not part of the Mosaic Law.

Our text says:

“David’s anger was greatly kindled against the (rich) man” (v. 5).

Then he says to Nathan:

“As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die.”

There is nothing in Jewish law stating that stealing is punishable by death.

What’s this all about?

I think Nathan might be relying on David’s own sense of having a guilty conscience, and the anxious desire to make amends and to do the right thing.

It has been my own experience as a person and a pastor that guilt makes us unusually uptight in all other areas of our lives.

As King, it is David’s obligation to dispense justice and to protect his subjects.

But in the affair with Bathsheba, and the cover up with the death of her husband, Uriah, David has done precisely the opposite.

Now, upon hearing Nathan's tale, David's zeal to see that justice is served is provoked.

In other words, because he knows, in his own conscience, that he has done something incredibly wrong, he wants to be a champion of justice.

So, he erupts in anger.

David, by his excessive anger, condemns himself, and is now the helpless target of the denunciation that Nathan will unleash.

And unleash it he does.

But like a shrewd prosecutor, Nathan starts out very carefully and quietly

He says, "Let me tell you about this case."

And when David erupts in anger and rules that the man must die, Nathan knows that he has him trapped.

David's own guilt overcomes him, and his misplaced anger exposes him.

David asks, "*Who is this man?*"

Nathan utters the unforgettable testimony, "*You are the man!*"

Nathan acts very shrewdly here.

David, the King and dispenser of justice, has lied, coveted, committed adultery, and even was an accomplice to murder.

Nathan knew this, but he didn't stand before David and his court and accuse him of these sins and crimes.

Why?

Because he is a prophet of God, and he is reflecting the grace of God.

How so? we may ask.

If there is ever any hope of persuasion, God goes for confession over condemnation.

God never condemns a person without the opportunity to confess sin and receive the absolution assurance of forgiveness.

It is very easy to condemn a person in such a way that you raise their defense mechanism of denial so high that there is no way they will ever repent.

It glorifies God to tell the truth about sin.

But it glorifies God more if telling the truth brings about repentance.

And if we condemn a person in such a way that makes it impossible for the person to repent, then we are being self-righteous.

We are not a vehicle for the shrewd grace of God.

Unfortunately, John 3:17 doesn't get as much attention as John 3:16, but it really should.

"For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save it."

And Nathan is following that.

And why did he do it the way he did it?

Because nobody sins, especially the way David did, without spinning a web of rationalizations, defense mechanisms, deceptions, and denials.

David is a perfect example of what happens.

Nathan knew the side of David — the spiritual side that inspired him to write and sing songs to God, and the desire to build a temple for the worship of God.

Unfortunately, we never read further in II Samuel, when it says:

“Then David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the Lord.’”

Nathan replies:

“The Lord has taken away your sin.

You are not going to die!”

We know Nathan’s words had an impact on David, because he wrote Psalm 51, which we profess on Ash Wednesday, the greatest most complete expression of repentance in the Bible.

Like any sin, there are consequences — collateral damage.

Uriah is killed, and the child David and Bathsheba have out of wedlock will also die.

Does David deserve condemnation?

In our book, he does.

It seems unfair that David is allowed to live.

That raises an important question for all believers.

How can God assure us of pardon, no matter how bad our sins?

On Tuesday, this past week, two 85-year-old men I knew and respected died.

One, of course, was Wayne Rumble, a wonder father, husband, and man, who died doing what he loved most — flying an airplane.

Tomorrow we will gather in this sanctuary to give thanks for his life, to commend him to our Merciful Redeemer, and to comfort one another in our grief.

The other 85-year-old man who died last Tuesday was Eugene Peterson, the translator of **The Message**, and the author of 35 books on spirituality and ministry.

Gene was a major reason for my return to parish ministry.

Gene preached a sermon on this text and said this:

“There is a remarkable verbal resonance of this story of Nathan standing before David, and that of Jesus standing before Pilate.

Nathan says of David, “You are the man,” and Pilate says to Jesus, “Behold the man.”

Two courtrooms, II Samuel 12 and John 19.

In II Samuel, the man who is in the judgment seat should be in the dock as the accused.

In John 19, the man who stands in the dock accused and condemned, should be in the judgment seat.

God sent a prophet to rectify the first situation, and turns the judge into the accused, getting David to repent.

In Pilate’s courtroom, nobody shows up, and the accused dies, forsaken on a cross.

The judge of All the Earth who, did nothing wrong, dies condemned.

Why?

So that we Davids, when we repent, can receive forgiveness.

Beloved people of God,
we can receive forgiveness, because Jesus was condemned for us.
Jesus stood in the dock, where WE should be.
He died so that we can live.
Martin Luther realized the initiating activity of God in bringing out forgiveness and
salvation.
We witnessed that grace in the baptism of Matthew Alexander Panait this morning.
In baptism, God acts in joining Matthew to Christ.
Baptism is the single great act of grace that provides deliverance from sin and death,
and confers the faith crucial for Christian life.
In baptism and holy communion, the two Lutheran sacraments of Grace, God
justifies us and fulfills the promises of faith and eternal life.

AMEN