

4th Sunday of Pentecost

Sermon 6.12.16

Sermon: 2 Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13-15
Luke 7:36-8:3

My junior choir director called me an asshole.

She wasn't wrong.

I was in the fourth grade maybe, we were practicing in the fellowship hall one Wednesday afternoon the song we'd sing next in worship, and I was probably standing near Amy Barvenik and maybe Julie Hart. She, Mrs. Kelley, was giving of her time, giving to her church, directing the junior choir, though I don't think she had a particular love of music. Mrs. Silverstone did, her do-director, an alto and regular member of the adult church choir. But there Mrs. Kelley was anyway in her free time, guiding us, teaching us.

I probably discounted her. I probably figured she didn't have much to teach me. I'd always loved music, had performed musicals along with their record albums in my living room for years now. I'd memorized *The Sound of Music* and was working on *My Fair Lady*. Ten, eleven years old, I'd pretty much mastered it all. I was just waiting for greatness to knock on my door and say, "Come on, now. We've been waiting for you."

I imagine Mrs. Kelley was having us go over again some line we hadn't quite gotten right. Maybe we'd garbled the words, maybe we hadn't agreed upon the musical line. I must have given off some sign of defiance, some sign of resentment that I should be made to rehearse something I'd already so clearly made my own. It was the last defiant response she would take from me. "You're an asshole," she muttered.

I don't remember any of this for certain: nothing but her assessment. I don't remember who else was there, how old exactly I was, what was my actual thinking. I just remember the assessment, and though we both knew she shouldn't have said it, I never tattled on her because, of all the shameful behavior on display that day, mine was worse.

Like I said, she wasn't wrong. She also wasn't entirely right. I'm not an asshole, but I was certainly acting like one. People do sometimes. Thank God, then, for the other people who call them on it, who call *us* on it. Thank God for Mrs. Kelley. Of all the teachers I've had, of all the assessments I've ever undergone, I remember that as clear as any.

I believe we'd be as monstrous as we could get away with being. I believe each of us would be precisely as monstrous as allowed to be. I also believe there's no pleasure in being a

monster. There's no joy in it, no gratitude, no contentment or satisfaction. And these are all things, in my experience anyway, that make life more pleasurable than frustrating, more delightful and less disappointing. Joy, gratitude, contentment: these are all things that make life worth living, that make for the life that truly is life.

David: I doubt he started out as a monster. After all, he was the youngest of seven brothers, so he was often (I imagine) on the bottom of the pile, which I mean quite literally. Remember, I have two sons, and we have such a pile. Our pile is smaller than David's family's would have been, but there is still a pile, and Jack's usually on the bottom of it. Don't worry, he seems to like it there. He'll sometimes even kick Tobias to get Tobias to pummel him.

That said, I further imagine David's attitude being similar to Jack's. That he enjoyed the fact of his big brothers, that he sort of loved whatever attention they heaped on him, even when that heaping was manifest physically: I imagine he liked the dynamic friction that made him who he was.

Sibling rivalry can be hateful, destructive, of course. And we get plenty of examples of that in the early stories of the Bible. Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers: all these show us, among other things, that the Bible isn't shy of putting on display the dark side of family relationships, *human* relationships. The lack of such a thing here, then, in the story of David and his brothers: this could suggest that there was more light here than dark, more love here than envy.

On thing's for certain, there was a lot in David to envy. He was said to be handsome with beautiful eyes. He was a poet and a musician, but also a warrior who conquered a lot more than he ever lost. Given all that, the storied fact that everyone accepted David's being chosen from among his older brothers, anointed by the prophet Samuel, and later brought into Samuel's service while the older brothers all stayed on the farm back in Bethlehem could suggest to us that, though there was much to envy about David, envy didn't really come into it. Perhaps all in that family were content to be themselves, had been encouraged to be themselves and appreciated for what they themselves brought to the family, to the farm, to the world. It's when we recognize the value of all of life's particulars, rather than valuing one set of particulars over and against all other particulars: it's only then that we're free of envy, free fully to live.

Paradoxically, that freedom dissipates when what has fettered us no longer holds.

David's rise to power was well-fought and hard-won. He slipped out of Saul's ironclad will to kill him. He famously beat the giant Goliath, a terror from among the Philistines, and with but a slingshot and a stone. He became a warlord whose army of outlaws beat back the enemies of Judah to the west and southwest. And at last, political machinations on many fronts landed David as ruler of Judah for seven years, and then Israel and Judah, now a united kingdom, for thirty-three more. He won Jerusalem from the Philistines, and recaptured from them the Ark of the Covenant, which they'd stolen and kept though it brought them only bad fortune.

Now at rest in the so-called city of David, this city of peace, the Jeru-salem, David looked out upon all he'd conquered and all he'd established. He looked out one late afternoon as he was walking along the roof of his palace. It was spring, and so was warm—that time of year when kings go to battle. But he hadn't gone this year, had instead sent his officers and all Israel with them. They ravaged the Ammonites and besieged Rammah. It's like now during spring when you do your weeding, your annual beating back of what means to take over your lawn and garden. But then it was armies that would fight over tribal boundaries.

But David hadn't gone off to do battle, was maybe getting a little too old for such things. Instead, he rested on his couch and then would rise to take walks. And it happened one late afternoon, that he'd risen from his couch and was now taking a walk along the roof, when he looked out across other rooftops, upon one of which was a woman bathing. And she was beautiful. So he sent someone to inquire about the woman, and it was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite."

So David sent messengers to fetch her, and she came to him, and he lay with her.

Then she returned to her house.

The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."

David sent for Uriah then—Uriah, Bathsheba's husband. A soldier, Uriah would have been in one of those seasonal battles, a springtime bloodletting that was a matter of course. David supposed, then, that sending Uriah home would have him soon receiving a warm welcome from his wife. He would lay with her, and then he would take her pregnancy to be his.

But Uriah was not only a soldier; he was a *good* one. So when he was back in his home-city, he slept not in his own home with his wife, but at the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of his lord.

These servants told the king that Uriah had not gone home, so David sent for Uriah and said to him, "You have just come from a journey. Why did you not go down to your house?"

Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing."

So David said to Uriah, "Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back," which Uriah did—stayed until the next day so now to be invited to eat and drink David, David hoping to make him drunk and in the evening to send him home, less conscientious now for all that wine.

But Uriah didn't go home. He stayed again at the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of the lord.

In the morning, then, David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. Uriah wouldn't have been able to read, so even if he'd wanted to sneak a peek, he wouldn't have been able to decipher what it said. But Joab would have. This is what is said: "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die."

That's what happened. The king had his army set up one of his soldiers to be killed so the king could cover up for having raped and impregnated that soldier's wife.

I don't think David started off as a monster. I think he became one as what fetters hold us all one by one came loose off him so that eventually nothing could stop him. No one could say to him, "No." No one *would* say to him, "No."

I also don't think David ended up as a monster, a thing for which he has both the Lord and the Lord's prophet Nathan to thank. The Lord, after all, was "displeased" with this thing that David had done. So he sent Nathan to him to tell him a story that presented as actual, as factual. It infuriated David to hear. That a rich man had exploited a poor man, stripped him of his one and beloved ewe so the rich man wouldn't have to feed a guest from his own flock: this

arose in David both a desire to take revenge by killing that rich man, but then more reasonably a plan for restorative punishment that would set things back to right.

But no, for “You are the man!” Nathan confronted David, at last someone telling him in essence what Mrs. Kelley had to tell me—though certainly more urgently. Whole lives were at stake. Of course, the more powerful the monster the greater damage he can do.

We should be very careful, then, what power we hand over to what people.

One way we could take such care is to ask the question, to whom are you accountable? Who in your life that, when confronted by this person, might leave you chagrined, rightfully shamed? Is there anyone, is there ever such a time, that’s had you knocked back on your heels in seeing what you’ve done?

If a person has no one who serves as such fettering, then that person shouldn’t be entrusted with much power.

The fear of the Lord has something to say here. This thing that is most troubling to so many, this persistent biblical concept—the fear of the Lord—that strike much contemporary hearing as anathema to this Living Lord whom we know as love: it’s the preacher’s most challenging topic. Why would we fear the Lord? Why *should* we fear the Lord?

I never know how exactly to explain it, I just find that I sometimes encounter it, encounter its truth. This is one of those times.

It seems to me this is what David rediscovered when he saw himself in his full monstrosity: a fear of the Lord, a recognition that without such fettering we become ourselves fearsome; a fear of the Lord, a full seeing that without ultimate accountability to something powerful and good, we will ourselves become powerful and dangerous.

If that works for you, go with it. If it doesn’t, leave it lie. Either way, watch for people who operate as if they’re not accountable to anything—to no person, to no given thing, to neither reality nor history nor facts nor their own prior stances or assertions. Shame is another tricky thing. In religion and in psychology, shame is an experience and concept easily turned abusive. But shame can serve for good, in that those who have no shame are uniquely menacing. Those who have no shame shouldn’t be trusted with much power.

Perhaps, then, this is what made David great—for he *is* remembered to have been great. And I’m asking us to set aside the moment the fact that we don’t hear from his victims: we don’t hear from Bathsheba about the terrible turn her life has taken. (All we’ll hear from

her this morning is thanks to George Peele on the front of the bulletin it.) We don't hear from Uriah (David made sure of that) and we don't hear from the child who was struck ill as punishment for David. I'm asking us to set all that aside *for now* and to consider what the story means for us to consider: David and why he could be remembered as great. This is perhaps why: that he could be shamed, he could be chagrined. He apparently didn't want to be the monster he had become, for he said as much: "I have sinned against the Lord." Perhaps it's this, then, that made his once nascent greatness, and then full-blown greatness, something he could grow old into with grace: that what fetters he might have otherwise thrown off he instead held onto.

These fetters give life its shape. These fetters that bind us also free us—free us to be ourselves in freeing us to exert ourselves, though in the firm faith that we will be met by those who love us, and those to whom we are accountable, with equal exertion.

A few weeks ago, the scripture readings that we might have heard but didn't (for my having gone in a different direction) remembered Jesus promising peace to come to his disciples.

It had me wondering, what is such peace?

It's easy, of course, to think of peace as stillness, as rest. But the more I thought about that, the less appealing it seemed and still less it seemed a thing I could relate to. After all, I like movement. I like being on the move—out for a walk, out for a row. I like being in conversation, and even in debate. I like a windy day. I like a spirited exchange of ideas. I like sparring with my kids at least as much as I like it when they're asleep. I like dynamism at least as much as stillness, if not more so. Peace, then, for me lately at least, has been more about meeting force that is equal to what force I assert. Knowing that I can fully be myself without the fear that I might overtake, overrun everything else, everyone around me: this is what I've most lately been experiencing as peace.

Incidentally, this is what is thought to bring comfort to a screaming baby: the assurance that the desire to exert one's will on the world won't actually result in the triumph of one's will over the whole world. To be held by someone, strong and fast, assures the wordless infant that, though his or her will is strong, it's the strongest thing there is.

As with a baby, so with me: my need, my insistence, my exertion won't make the world succumb, collapse, but will instead be met with fulfillment equal to my need, engagement equal to my insistence, accomplishment equal to my exertion.

Also incidentally, when rowing, the most gratifying feeling for me is when the oar is fully loaded, full water gathered in the spoon of the blade, just before beginning the drive. When the load is equal to the strength of the drive: this is the best feeling, this is "peace." On the other hand, when I'm ready with full strength at the beginning of the drive, if the oar were loaded with nothing, if I met no resistance against my force, I'd have a fast drive, but it wouldn't get me anywhere. I'd have accomplished nothing, though I might think of myself as pretty great.

I believe we'd be as monstrous as we could get away with being. But there's no joy in being a monster, no gratitude or contentment or satisfaction. There's nothing of the things that make for the life that truly is life.

One way, then, to fend off our monstrosity is confession. As David did urgently, "I have sinned against the Lord," we might also do. And a good place to do confession is here in church, before a loving Lord who means for us to live, amidst a congregation meant to be a beloved community, and by a spirit whose action is forgiveness and restoration.

That we are each great and powerful: this is true. That we are each neither the greatest nor the most powerful: this is also true. What's more, it's good. I say this from experience, a lesson to learn again and again.

Thanks be to God.