Sermon for The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, August 18, 2018  
Text: 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a  
Title: Your are the man

There are a lot of expressions for it: calling someone out; making it plain; a come to Jesus moment; a confrontation. Think about the people in your life who have, at one point or another, expressed their concern for or frustration with or disappointment in you in a way that actually allowed you to see what they were describing more clearly – to see yourself more clearly – and make a different, more intentional choice around that particular behavior moving forward. Maybe it was your own child who pulled you aside after a dinner with some of her friends and explained that when you make a joke about how incomprehensible the LGBTQ alphabet soup is, what her friends who actually identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer hear is that you are willing to learn the names of every team in the National Football League but can’t muster the tiniest bit of interest in their lived experience, literally just enough to know five words. Maybe it was the friend who stopped over for a visit, and then in a moment of quiet mentioned, with such love and concern, that she’d noticed you seemed to drink a bit too much the last few times your families met up for dinner, and had been slurring your speech any time she called after five, and asked if you were really doing OK. Maybe it was a colleague who pointed out that your tone with young people in the office was noticeably condescending, and it really wasn’t appropriate.

Think, conversely, of the times you have found yourself in the difficult position of initiating such a conversation. In cases of great concern for people you love, bring to mind the angst. How hard it was to find the right time - I’ll bring it up today, yes, definitely today - only to find hours, days, weeks slipping through your fingers. How concerned you were the other person would misunderstand. How aware you were that this could either be the end of the relationship or the best thing you ever did for it. In cases of great frustration or offense, bring to mind the outrage. How hard it was to understand where this person could be coming from. How they could justify using that word, saying those things, being so selfish. And how you weighed whether or not it was worth saying anything at all.
Having tough, honest conversations like this is hard among the most intimate of friends and family, and it is even harder if not impossible when the person who has done wrong is your boss, your priest, your mentor, your teacher, your elected official. So it may come as no surprise that – well, you know all those people you just thought of who have blessed you by holding up a mirror at some critical moment? King David just didn’t have anyone like that. Maybe he did at some point in his life. Perhaps his brothers or his father could have called him to account when he was but a humble shepherd boy, but those days were long gone. Having a come to Jesus moment with a friend is not quite the same thing as speaking truth to power, and as David’s power grew, and grew, and grew, authorized not only by the people by Yahweh, God’s own self, those around him slowly stopped saying anything when he made the occasional racist comment. Eyes were cast down when he bullied the aide but no one said anything. And perhaps there was some muttering at the court’s water jug about the swearing but it went no further. The few people who did try to express their concerns were dismissed or diminished, belittled and betrayed, so that, eventually, those around him were sufficiently discouraged from following in their tracks.

This seems to be a rather universal phenomenon. Something about power corrupting. There’s even a lovely children’s tale about this, first published in 1837 by Hans Christian Anderson, in which a King commissions a couple very convincing weavers to create the most distinguished, most elaborate, most beautiful clothes ever seen out of a special fabric that was invisible to those in his court unfit for their office. As the weavers set up shop in the castle and went to work, everyone peeking into the window was alarmed to realize they couldn’t see the beautiful threads. No one wanted to say anything, afraid of being found out themselves, so they assured the king that progress was being made – the finest of suits, sir. Truly. Only when the King was it finally presented with his stunning new outfit, it turned out he couldn’t see anything either. Nada. Zilch. But rather than admit this, or acknowledge that he had been swindled, he undressed, made a show of putting on his newest, most expensive costume, and headed to the much-anticipated red-carpet event, where no one quite knew what to do until a child pointed out that the King was naked. Exposed, in every sense of the word.

When we find him this morning, David is a critical juncture in his life and his reign. Up until this point his star has been rising. Israel is flourishing, expanding. His power and his reach are both growing ever greater. But then, as we heard a few weeks ago, he stops doing what Kings
do. He stays home when kings go out to battle. He rests when Kings are reaping. And more importantly, he stops using his power for what it was intended. His power was given to him to unify Israel, to draw God’s people closer to God, to help them walk more fully in the ways of God’s law, and instead David uses it to use the wife of one of his greatest soldiers, Bathsheba, whom he gets pregnant. And then he uses it to attempt a massive cover up. And when that fails he uses it to have her innocent husband murdered so that she can come into his household and the crown can avoid a scandal.

Surely, we might think, someone must have noticed what David was up to. Someone must have said *something*! There were the messengers sent to get Bathsheba, who might have stepped outside but would still have heard her screaming. There were her handmaids, who must have noticed something was wrong when she returned from the King’s palace and rushed back up to her bath. There were the soldiers who brought Uriah back from battle and must have wondered why. And, of course, there was Joab, the army commander made complicit in David’s ploy who ultimately contrived the husband’s death. David was sneaky, but he was also sloppy, and his little secret wasn’t that secret at all.

But no, it turns out no one said anything. There was no close confidant, no friend, no brother to sit him down and say, “Look, I love you man, but this is not OK.” And so, that uncomfortable duty fell to the Nathan, whom God sent to David in the wake of this calamitous affair. Now Nathan was a prophet, which means his job – his calling – involved calling people to account, holding space for these hard, human, holy conversations. Being a prophet is, to put it mildly, a daunting call, which is part of why most every prophet in the Bible initially tells God, “Thanks, but I’m a little busy right now …” when God first comes a knocking. But Nathan was the closest thing David had to a friend. He’d become something of a go between for the King and Yahweh, and while they probably didn’t go out drinking together on Friday nights, they weren’t strangers, and likely felt some mutual respect for one another. Which is part of what makes the parable Nathan brings to David so searing.

He knows David well enough to know that he can’t simply say to him, “You have sinned against the Lord!” and point out all of David’s transgressions, because David wouldn’t be able to hear that. And the point isn’t for Nathan to say “you have sinned” – after all, both Nathan and God already know this – but to help David see it for himself. So Nathan, like another prophet who will come a few generations later, uses a story to illuminate the present situation, to shed
light on what David is not yet willing to see. He tells him of two men, one rich, with many flocks and herds, great wealth, tremendous power and privilege; the other poor, desperate, who owned only a lamb, a small and gentle thing that had become his only companion in a cold, cruel world. One day a traveler comes to visit the rich man, who, even though he has much, does not want to take an animal from his vast flocks to feed his guest, and instead steals the beloved lamb from the poor man, cooks it, and offers it up for dinner.

David’s anger is kindled. He is filled with righteous indignation. *What right has this man! What a terrible, selfish, short-sighted thing to do! He should be put to death! And the poor man restored fourfold for his loss!* David is not without compassion. Not without wisdom. But he has his blind spots. And now that Nathan has awakened the King’s compassion, his concern, helped him see in another what he cannot see in himself, now that some of the King’s barriers are down, he gets to the point. You, he cries, *you are the man!* This terrible deed. This horrible violation. It is yours. You are guilty of it. And I see it. And God sees it. There is nowhere to hide. Your secret is out in the open, your darkness as plain as day. And surely David felt like the King preening proudly on the red carpet in nothing but his polka dot boxers: completely exposed.

But Nathan doesn’t stop with berating David for the wrong he has done to Uriah and Bathsheba. He goes on to point out the other, more foundational offense: the wrongful use of the power and wealth and privilege given him by God for *God’s* purposes. *God’s.* Not for the fulfilling of David’s lust. Not for the satisfaction of David’s desires. But for the flourishing of God’s people. “I anointed you king over Israel,” God reminds him, “and I rescued you from the hand of Saul. I gave you your master’s house … and 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 God’s sight?” Ouch. Talk about someone making it plain.

Now, David clearly deserved this, but one of the things I find most remarkable about this story is his response. David does not get defensive. He does not try to explain. He doesn’t attack Nathan’s character. He doesn’t try to minimize or justify his actions. He says, instead, simply, “I have sinned against the Lord.” He acknowledges his wrongdoing. He repents.

We have precious few models for honest, hard, loving, hopeful conversations in our public discourse today, so I think it is important to see in this parable not only David’s shame but God’s hope. David sinned – against God, against Bathsheba, against Uriah,
against everyone who put their trust in him as King. He’s a criminal. Multiple felony counts. He deserves a life sentence at best. But God doesn’t send prophets into our world to simply point out the error of our ways. God sends prophets into our world to remind us that we are capable of something different, something more. That when we have done wrong God knows we can do better.

On August 28, 1963, when The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King stood before a sprawling crowd in Washington, D.C., he could have simply catalogued all the ways in which American society was guilty of racism. The list would be long and it would be searing and it would be accurate, and there’s a slim chance it might have made a handful of people realize the error of their ways. But instead he stood before the crowd and said, “I have a dream.” I see something you might not yet see, you might not know is possible, you might have forgotten was your birthright. And I am here to remind you.

The prophet’s job is to make it plain, and we can only know how short we have fallen when we appreciate how great God’s dream for us was in the first place. Nathan didn’t need David to tell him he was right. He knew he was right. This wasn’t about making a point, or some sort of power play. He didn’t come to the king to degrade or demoralize him. He came to inspire him. To remind him who he could be – who he had been made to be. To call him out of himself: the wise, compassion, courageous man he had once been and yet could be again. God saw David’s sin, and God helped David to see it, so that he could be freed from it.

God has a dream for us. God sees when we fall short of it, and painful as it can be, God comes into our lives in quiet moments, in conversations with one another, in fits of inspiration, to remind us that not only is a different tomorrow possible, but a different today. You are the man, indeed. Give us eyes to see, O Lord, and ears to hear. Amen.