

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Truth Telling”
2 Samuel 12:1-9
October 21, 2018

When you take preaching classes in seminary, one of the artful things they teach you is that your sermon should “do” what the text you’re preaching “does.”

In other words, if the story in the Bible you’re preaching on comforts,
your sermon should comfort.

If it convicts, your sermon should be convicting.

If it’s hopeful, your sermon should be hopeful.

It’s generally good advice.

[pause]

Today... our passage picks up right after David’s shut and locked the door on his dark and devious ways. In Chapter 11, David is sitting around in his palace when the rest of his men are off in battle.

He’s caught in one of those seven deadly sins the ancients called *acedia* or *sloth*. It’s known as the noonday demon.

It’s midlife for David, and he’s disengaged and apathetic. The fire of life has become more of a left-over smolder...

There’s no heat. No vitality.

Then one day, he looks over and sees Bathsheba bathing on her rooftop. That gets his blood pumping and makes him feel alive for the first time in awhile

Bathsheba is the wife of one of his men... one of the men who is off fighting in battle for him. But that inconvenient little truth is easily overlooked.

He sends for her. He is the king after all. It’s a stressful job, you know. There are lots of demands and lots of pressures. One of the few perks is that you get what you want, when you want it. It’s just a little way of coping with the stress... you see.

So, Bathsheba is taken to him... or rather he “takes” her... and when he’s done with her, he sends her back home. I imagine she’s sent with a little reminder that he is the king, and if she doesn’t keep her trap shut, he’ll have her husband’s neck sliced open and make it look like an accident.

Bathsheba’s story is another #MeToo story. The Bible’s filled with them, you know. Like most women still today, there’s way too much at stake for Bathsheba to speak up, at least at first. So, she keeps silent.

David’s intimidation would have worked... and who knows, it probably did on other occasions that we don’t know about. Generally, when one hidden story comes to the light, there are others still back there.

But this time there’s a problem.

Bathsheba sends a note to the king with two simple little words: **“I’m pregnant.”** Enough said.

But, you know David's a powerful man. He isn't worried. Powerful men have all kinds of ways to take care of these things.

David calls her husband Uriah home from the battle lines under the façade of getting an update on how things are going. Then he sends Uriah home for the night.

See? Easy.

Uriah will spend the night with his wife. He'll think the baby is his. Problem solved.

But Uriah doesn't go home. He tells the king, "It would be dishonorable to sleep in my own bed with my wife, when my men are out fighting," Uriah has no idea **how** ironic his words are. After all, it's just a scratch on the surface of what David's been doing.

I imagined Uriah's words burned a little in David's ears... Certainly, we the readers, get the point. Uriah is far more honorable than the King.

But David doesn't give up. Powerful men rarely do, you know. He gets Uriah drunk and sends him home for a second night. Surely with Uriah's inhibitions down, things will happen.

But still it doesn't work.

And David... still doesn't give up. He will ***fight to the very end to defend his honor***... no matter how many lies it takes.

This time, David writes a letter to the general of the army with a very simple instruction: "Make sure Uriah is killed in battle. Make it look legitimate." Then David gives Uriah the sealed note, and has Uriah carry his own death sentence back to the general.

This time, the cover-up works. Uriah dies. Bathsheba is informed. And as soon as the funeral is over, David makes her one of his wives. A few months later she bares him a son. And everything looks legitimate.

Crisis averted. Cover-up complete.

David goes about his business.

That's where our story from the lectionary picks up today. It's been a few months. The door on this dark secret has been locked up tight. The key thrown away. The baby is born, and no one needs be the wiser.

But David didn't count on one person getting involved: God.

Chapter 11 ends with a little teaser. "What David had done was evil in the Lord's eyes." ...which is to say, God sees... even when we think nobody else does. God... sees.

So, God sends Nathan, the prophet, a longtime friend of David's... someone David knows and trusts. And I think that's important for us to notice. It's David's friend that God asks to speak the hard truth to him.

So, as a faithful servant of God, and as a faithful friend, Nathan tells the king a story, and in the process, flips on the light switch, exposing all of David's secret sins.

Like I said... they tell me a good sermon does what the text does...

So, I started making a list of all your sins this week... even the ones you've been trying to cover up... and I thought I'd just shine a little light on them.

Ready? ...Nervous?

Well don't be, because I chickened out.

I was afraid you might just return the favor, which didn't sound too fun.

Besides, you who have been learning about the Enneagram may know that I'm a 9 and one of the classic characteristics of my personality is that we hate conflict. We tend to avoid it like the plague. So, even if I were Nathan, I'd probably tell God, "Go find someone else. There's no way I'm confronting the King...."

I hate conflict, and especially interpersonal conflict... conflict with those I care about, like you all. In fact, in the spirit of truth telling, let me just to tell you a little truth about myself.

There are lots of parts of being a pastor that I love.

But the part of my job that I dislike the most,

the part of my job that sucks the life out of me...

the part that can even make me want to throw in the towel...

is dealing with conflict.

So, my tendency is to avoid it if there's any way I can.

But I've been learning, that's not so healthy... It's not for me and it's not for the church.

So just know, if I confront you with something, it costs me something just to bring it up. But I'm learning I have to if I care about you, and if I care about Dayspring, ***because love requires telling the truth.***

Let me say that again. ***Love requires telling... even the hard truths.***

Nathan cared about David.

And Nathan cared about the kingdom. But confronting the King is dangerous business. It could be a death sentence, you know. I mean if David had Uriah killed to cover things up, there's no promising he wouldn't have Nathan killed either.

But out of faithfulness to their friendship, and faithfulness to God, Nathan knows... he has to say something. So, Nathan told David this story of the rich man stealing the poor man's only sheep. And David gets full of righteous indignation. "That guy's a "Son of a ... Devil", David says. "He's going to pay!"

And then Nathan looks him in the eye and utters those famous words: "You are the man!" Nathan says to David, "You are the man!"

It's one of the greatest moments of truth telling in all the Bible. And it's reminding me again of just how essential, and yet, how hard it can be, and how dangerous it can feel to confront one another with the truth.

It seems like this is one of those tricky dynamics that the church should be especially good at. But if you've been around church life for a while, you know we often aren't.

Here's what one pastor wrote about it:

"Telling the truth in love is, in my experience, the practice that the church carries out most poorly... We either shrink back from telling it because we don't want to drive people away, or we approach people with both guns blazing because we don't care about driving them away."¹

He's right, you know. I've seen both happen in different churches along the way. The church has a long track record of not doing a very good job at telling the truth to each other... or at least not doing it in love...

that is... the radical, revealing and reconciling kind of love that God demonstrates toward us.

But I think Nathan... gives us a glimpse of how we might do this better. There are a couple things he shows us that are essential. And for starters, it's his committed friendship with David. This is where telling the truth has to begin.

We haven't earned the right to tell someone the hard truths if we are not committed to our relationship with them. Truth telling requires deep fidelity,
fidelity to your relationship,
and fidelity to the other person's well-being.

MaryKate Morse, the lead mentor of my doctoral program who was here back in February to lead that conference on listening... she is also a 9 on the Enneagram. She also doesn't like conflict.

But she is the person at Portland Seminary that has the awful job of kicking a student out of the seminary if they aren't cutting it, or if they shouldn't be in seminary to begin with.

Let me just say, I would hate that job!

And so, I asked her, as a 9, as someone who doesn't like conflict, "**How do you do that?**"

And this is what she told me. "I won't do it until I've prayed enough for that person that I've begun to care deeply about their well-being.

When I care about them as a person,
when I can love them with God's love...

and I know being in seminary is not good for them,
then I'm able to tell them the truth.
And most of the time, they are able to hear it."

Before she goes around slinging truths at people, she prays until she cares deeply about them.

¹ Quoted in Christine D. Pohl, *Living into Community: Cultivating Practices That Sustain Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011).

Christine Pohl wrote a book on the practices that sustain the church, and one of them is specifically about Truth Telling. She says, “Any capacity ‘to speak the truth in love’ depends on fidelity and on taking our relationships seriously.”²

That’s where our truth telling has to begin. Nathan didn’t come to destroy David or to leave him high and dry. Sure, Nathan was furious, absolutely. But Nathan was also David’s friend and mentor, and continues to serve the King after this. And Nathan knew that David had to face the truth... because if he didn’t, things would undoubtedly get worse.

Telling the truth was essential for David’s well-being.

When I was in high school and college I remember many times telling my parents that I wasn’t interested in their opinions of what I should do. “I can decide for myself,” was my arrogant little refrain. (I’m sure none of the teenagers in our church are like that... right? Hope not.)
Well, thanks be to God, my parents didn’t always listen to me.

One time in my early 20’s, Jessi and I were at my parents’ home visiting for a few days. It was probably our first year of marriage...I don’t remember the details, but I remember it was one of those uncharacteristic conversations with my Dad.

“I noticed something that I have to tell you, Chris,” he said.

“Your sarcasm was getting the better of you while you were here. Your words were pretty cutting toward your wife in front of us all... and I’d hate to see that hurt and bitterness grow in your marriage.”

As a young man, and fairly newly married, I was embarrassed... and I knew he was right.... and that conversation hasn’t left me in these last 15 years... I’m still sorry today.

Sometimes... we need to hear the truth.

We do as individuals.

We do as a church.

You see, Nathan knew David needed to hear it, but he knew that more than David’s well-being was at stake. ***The kingdom...*** the community of God’s people... **was at stake.**

This is the other side of truth telling.

We can’t just avoid it.... so as not to hurt feelings...

not if we care about the community of God’s people.

Nathan was willing to risk a lot... his friendship with the King, his standing as a leader, even his own life... and ultimately, he was risking out of love for the community of God’s people....

Christina Pohl also says, “*Half-truths
endanger communities
and undermine our best efforts.”*

² Pohl, Kindle Location, 2741.

We have to tell the whole truth, even when the truth is harsh...
But we only have the wisdom to do that... or the right to do that...
when we are also committed to ***the well-being of the community.***

So, if we love the church,
and if we want the church to be what God intends it to be,
and have the ministry we are called to have...
there will be moments... not all the time, but moments,
when we have to tell one another uncomfortable things...
because the integrity and witness of the church depends on it.

So, this morning I'm going to take a risky step to say some uncomfortable things about the church in our time.

As much as it would be safer not to, love for the Church compels me to tell the truth.

And this story that we've been given this week by the lectionary, this story between Nathan and David, demands that the church gets honest with itself about a few things... and the church in America recognizes that sometimes, "**we are the man....**"

The truth is, some men have been falsely accused of all kinds of things... and their lives have been destroyed.

But that does not begin to compare to the number of women, like Bathsheba whose lives have been destroyed by sexual assaults and who have been ignored, silenced, or dismissed when they told the truth of their painful story.

And the truth is, I'm so weary of powerful men being believed while the words of women and minorities are discredited and dismissed.

My soul is weary of powerful men protecting other powerful men and ignoring the truths of the least of these among us.... and the church just turning a blind eye. That is not the way of Jesus.

The truth is, I'm weary of the political machines on the right and on the left that have co-opted the hearts, minds, and bodies of those that fill the church in America... so that their political identity is more important than their gospel identity.

I'm weary of the church on the left, co-opted by the political machine on the left, criticizing one president's sexual assaults while defending or ignoring another president's sexual assaults.

Can't we be equal opportunity truth tellers?

And the truth is, so many women have been silenced by power dynamics or have been afraid of power dynamics, that the #MeToo movement has only begun to scratch the surface of what women have long endured in our world, in our work places, ***and in our churches.***

It's older than David and Bathsheba.

And it's as current for us now as it was for Nathan in his time.

The truth is, I'm so weary of churches that are more concerned about protecting their existence than telling the truth about clergy sexual abuse and power abuses.

The truth is, protestant churches probably have as many if not more abuse cases by their clergy as the Catholic Church, but because we are a loose band of misfits, we don't hear about many of them in the news.

The truth is, we'd much rather point out the speck of dirt in our brother's and sister's eye, than address the log lodged in our own eye, as Jesus so pointedly puts it.

The truth is, we have to learn how to hear and receive the truths we don't want to hear...
especially when it comes from those on the margins of the church...
and even when it comes from those outside the church.
We have to learn to listen to them.

The truth is, we probably need to do more listening than talking,
but we do still have to find a way to tell the truth to each other.

Because Jesus told hard truths to his religious community,
and he told some hard truths to his closest friends, his disciples,
but he doesn't walk away from them either...

And I'm pretty sure Jesus is trying to show us in all that the way to be truth tellers,
because, after all... he is the way, the truth and the life....
which makes him a dangerously illuminating and transformational presence to be around.

[smile and laughing]

And, the truth is, that's why I keep stumbling after him, as best I know how.
And I need honest friends who are stumbling after him with me...

And the truth is, I'm counting on you all be those friends.

**Because that's what the church is called to be,
a band of truth-telling, truth-loving,
repenting and reconciling people,
stumbling after the great Truth Teller.**

Amen.

Reflection:

"Truth sustains community while deception destroys it." Mirslav Volf³

"Being truthful is not only about speaking hard things, but discerning the whole picture with gentleness, humility, and patience."⁴ Christine Pohl

Hymn of Response:

"I want to walk as a child of the Light, reflection and then sing vs. 1"

³ Quoted in Pohl.

⁴ Pohl, Kindle Location 2691.