

You're the Man!
Sermon on 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, August 6, 2006

Sometimes things get lost in translation. Take Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, for instance. In an otherwise laudable effort to make the scriptures contemporary and easily understood, something terrible happens to the Psalms. The 23rd Psalm, for instance, becomes: "GOD, my shepherd! I don't need a thing. / You have bedded me down in lush meadows, / you find me quiet pools to drink from. / True to your word, / you let me catch my breath / and send me in the right direction." The Aussie Bible version of creation says: "Out of the blue God knocked up the whole bang lot. ... God said, 'Let's have some light' and bingo — light appeared." Even hip-hop has gotten in on the act of updating the Bible in an effort to make it, well, hip. The story of Jesus' birth, which is forever seared in my memory in the language of the Revised Standard Version, gets a slightly different rhythm and flavor: "Back in the day around Jesus' birth, right before he appeared on earth, Ceasar Augustus was the big-time sire, ruling the entire Roman Empire."¹ (Now you understand why no major rap recording labels have called me to cut a disc.)

Thus I was terribly afraid that I might open to the text of 2 Samuel 11, only to find Nathan saying to David, "You da' man!" As these modern translations and slang versions of the Bible demonstrate, the language we employ powerfully shapes our understanding, and indeed even our experience, of the God revealed in scripture. And so, as Barbara Brown Taylor points out in her book, *Speaking of Sin*, the language we use to talk about theological concepts such as sin and salvation also shapes our understanding and experience. And the way in which the Church talks about theological concepts, and sin in particular, has dramatically changed.

¹ The Script: Bible stories retold in hip-hop, poetic form

The Old Testament had three primary words to describe sin: *chatah*, usually translated ‘sin’, means to miss the mark, to fall short of the target. *Avah*, usually translated ‘iniquity’, means to act wrongly, often with wrong intent and in violation of God’s commandments. *Pasha*, usually translated ‘transgression’, meant actively to rebel against God, to be in full-fledged revolt. The New Testament’s preferred word for sin is *hamartia*, which most fully expresses the idea of missing the mark or falling short. All of these concepts of sin have in common the theme of going against God’s will.²

Enter most mainline churches today, and chances are that you will not hear sermons on sin. There’s an old story about a woman who attended church devotedly, and her husband who just as steadfastly refused to go. One Sunday the woman was sick, but not wanting to miss anything, sent her husband. When he returned from church, the woman asked her husband what the sermon was about. “Sin,” her husband answered. “Well,” asked the wife, “what did the preacher say?” “As best I recall,” replied her husband, “he was pretty strongly against it.”

Unfortunately, most sermons, when they do dare to venture onto this treacherous homiletical terrain, find ways to hedge and hem and haw. As best as we preachers recall, we’re against sin. But we don’t dare call it that for fear of scaring away prospective new members and thus prospective donors. Perhaps especially in the mainline churches we have convinced ourselves that we cannot afford to speak of sin and repentance, selling out the good news of our salvation in Jesus Christ for the mess of pottage that is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.” “This is what we mean by cheap grace,” wrote Bonhoeffer, “The grace which amounts to the justification of sin without the justification of the repentant sinner.... Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without repentance,

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 2000) 48-49.

baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession.”³ As Barbara Brown Taylor puts it, “People do not want to hear about sin and repentance, after all. People want to hear about grace and forgiveness, although it is hard to imagine what those words might mean apart from the somber reality of sin.”⁴

Because people are reluctant to confront the reality of their own sinfulness and because preachers like me are loath to force their congregations to do so, we have embraced the language of the doctor’s office and the therapist’s couch. We talk about sin as sickness or brokenness, and illness becomes the metaphor for human failing. Our problems are caused not by sin but by bacteria or biochemistry or even our backgrounds: we weren’t loved sufficiently or we didn’t develop adequate self-esteem. Thus, “We receive diagnosis instead of judgment, treatment instead of penance.”⁵ And because sin, like illness, is something that happens to us, not something we choose, we cannot be held responsible for it.

The prophet, Nathan, however, had no such illusions. He knew that neither nations nor individuals could survive without being truthful with God and with themselves. Those who are called to serve God cannot be instruments of his grace as long as they have a “no-fault” theology. Being in essence the king’s personal preacher, Nathan was unafraid to “call ’em as he saw ’em” and to speak truth to power. And the truth, as Nathan saw it, is that David had sinned.

And David had not only sinned, but sinned grievously, “following,” in the words of the old prayer book, “too much the devices and desires” of his heart. Having seen the wife of Uriah bathing upon her roof, and finding her beautiful to behold, he lusted after her. Desiring to have her as his own, he took her and lay with her. And when she revealed that she was pregnant,

³ From “Costly Grace” in *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, trans. R. H. Fuller with some rev. by Irmgard Booth (New York: Touchstone Books, an imprint of Simon & Shuster, 1995) 44-45.

⁴ Taylor, 21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

David conspired to cover up his sin, ultimately resorting to murder when Uriah, the honest Hittite, would not participate in the king's callous scheme. What had begun with the ordinary, garden-variety sin of lust burst forth in the rank blossom of covetousness, adultery, and murder.

While David may have thought that his marriage to Bathsheba and the birth of the son conceived in sin meant an end to the whole sordid business, the matter was far from over, for "the thing that David had done displeased the Lord" (11:27). "The king may act. The king may kill. The king may be self-satisfied. The king, however, is not capable of reversing moral reality."⁶ So "the Lord sent Nathan to David" (12:1a) to speak the truth, to set the record straight, and to call the king to account.

Nathan does not come right out and detail David's sins. Instead he tells the king a story. It is the story of two men: one rich, one poor. The rich man's wealth was vast: he owned large flocks and herds. The poor man owned but one small ewe lamb, a lamb that he loved like it was his own beloved daughter. The lamb ate and drank and slept with him. When the rich man needed a lamb to prepare for a guest of his, he simply took the poor man's lamb, killed it, and fed it to his guest. And the story has a powerful effect. When David hears it, he rages against the man's heartlessness and cruelty. Such a man deserves to die, David cries, and ought to pay back fourfold what he has taken, for he was without pity. "You are the man," says Nathan.

David's reaction is like our own: He is shocked and angered by the rich man's action. Yet he does not recognize himself in the story, his own acts of selfishness, greed, and murder in those of the rich man. David has come to believe in his own story, the story that narrates how he has worked for what he has, how through hard work and diligence he has attained wealth and power. The tragedy is that David had come to believe his own story, and blinded by the temptations of wealth and power, could not see his own actions in the light of truth. Thus

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), p. 279.

Nathan must tell him the story, for as Will Willimon says, “Sin can be known only when our stories are exposed by more truthful stories.”⁷

Friends, uncomfortable as it is, is this not good news? Does this not point us to our need to be honest with God, with one another, and with ourselves? Does this not call us to confession, to that place where we acknowledge what we are and fail to be, to admit to what we have done and what we have left undone, to agree that we have indeed offended against God’s holy laws? To be honest, to name our sins, to confess our faults, is good news, for the recognition that something is wrong is the first step toward making it right again.

You are the man! And I am the man! We have sinned: missed the mark, violated the commandments, and rebelled against God. “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. [But] If we confess our sins, [God] who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8-9). And this is the gift of God, that the truth will make us free (John 8:32).

⁷ William H. Willimon, “A Peculiarly Christian Account of Sin” in *Theology Today*, July 1993, 220-228, at <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/jul1993/v50-2-article5.htm>.