

## Nathan's Story

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 10th Sunday after Pentecost, July 28, 1991. Scripture Lessons: 2 Samuel 12:1-14; Psalm 32; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-15.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

You're the starting quarterback on your high school football team. You have a pretty good football team but you realize it's not the greatest. But there's something strange about the way your team plays. You win every home game and lose the away games. Every one!

It seems like something more than the home field advantage is at work. The coach seems to be able to anticipate every play that the other team attempts. He always seems to know when the opposing team is going to pass or run. It's uncanny.

Then, by accident, you discover that your coach has the visiting team's coaches bugged. He knows exactly what their game plan is. He hears on his headphones every play that the opposing coach tells his quarterback.

What do you do?

After the shock wears off you consider your options. Something within you says, "Just keep quiet" But somehow you feel rotten every time you win. You think about simply quitting the team but you really like playing. Then you think about confronting the coach but your afraid of what he might do. Maybe he'll kick you off the team. Maybe he'll trump up charges against you. Maybe he'll even threaten you with physical harm.

What would you do?

Nathan was confronted with a dilemma that carried much more unpleasant consequences. Nathan was the King's own personal chaplain. He hobnobbed with the military and political leaders of the nation. His wife and children went around saying, "My dad is the chaplain to the king." There's something seductive about knowing rich and famous people. There's always a great temptation to tell such people only what they want to hear for fear of losing your privileged status.

But Nathan knows that David has committed serious sin. He's broken nearly all the Ten Commandments. He's coveted his neighbor's wife. He's taken Uriah's wife. He's committed adultery with her. He's intentionally deceived Uriah. He's murdered Uriah, indirectly.

"What should I do?" Nathan thinks. He knows that the king has the power to torture and kill him. He knows that if he keeps quiet his life will be a lot less complicated, at least for awhile.

But Nathan is also a prophet of God. We often think of a prophet as one who predicts the future. That's not the primary role of the prophet. The prophet is a man or woman called by God to speak God's word to others.

I'm a prophet! In the Reformed tradition Ministers of the Word are called to be prophets. We're called to preach the Word of God. In the Reformed Confessions preaching and prophesying are equated. When I preach the Word of God I'm prophesying.

Now there's usually an element of prediction in prophesying because

our actions carry with them consequences. "Whatever we sow, that shall we also reap." Our sins might be forgiven but they still carry consequences as David would later find out. For example, if we pollute the environment, I can promise the forgiveness of sins upon our repentance but I can also predict that we'll have to deal with the consequences of our environmental pollution. The prophet or minister of the Gospel is called by God to preach God's word and to point out the consequences of our actions.

Now in the biblical, prophetic tradition God calls prophets to speak his word to all people, high or low. So Nathan is called by God to speak God's word to King David and to declare to David the consequences of his sins.

In the kingdoms that surrounded Israel, the king was considered divine. Kings were worshiped as Gods. If you criticized the king it was like criticizing god. But things were different in Israel. The Kings of Israel weren't considered divine. They were considered to be fallible and sinful human beings who were just as capable of the grossest sins as anybody else. And the Lord's prophets were to speak the Word of God to kings as well as to commoners.

We, in the United States, have been greatly influenced in our history by this Biblical understanding of human nature. We believe that those who are in authority over us are under the law just like us. It's the duty and responsibility of citizens not to idolize our leaders, but to see them as

fallible human beings who are as liable to sin as we are. We believe that the more power an individual has, the more likely that individual will misuse that power. It's one of the jobs of the prophet or Minister of the Word, along with the preaching of the Gospel for the salvation of individuals, to be a watch-dog of those who are in authority over us, especially those who, like David, are popular.

Nathan knew what he must do. He faced his fears, placed his life on the line, and bravely went to King David. He told David a story about a rich man with many flocks who took the only lamb of a poor man rather one of his own flock to feed a stranger. David immediately recognized the injustice of the situation. "The rich man is worthy of death and must, at least, make a fourfold restitution." Like most of us, David found it easier to see the faults in others than in himself.

But then Nathan confronted David directly, "Thou art the man". "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel; I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; I gave you your master's house, and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah.... Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight?" Nathan boldly spoke the word of the Living God to David.

Several years ago commentator Nicholas Von Hoffman wrote an article about the great mush God the characterizes so much of American civil religion. "The Mush God", Hoffman writes, "has no theology to speak

of, being a Cream of Wheat divinity. The Mush God has no particular credo, no tenets of faith... the Mush God is the Lord of secular ritual... the Mush God is a serviceable god whose laws are... written on sand, amenable to amendment, qualification and erasure. This is a god that will compromise with you, make allowances..."

The God of the prophets makes no compromises, no allowances. Nathan was not the prophet of the Great Mush God. He was the prophet of the One who is described as a jealous God and a Consuming Fire.

And, unbelievably, confronted by the Word of God, David is also confronted with his own sin. The writer of the NT letter to the Hebrews confesses, "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." The Word of God pierced the heart of David and David confessed his sin. "I have sinned against the Lord."

And immediately, Nathan pronounces David's sins forgiven by God. David will still have to deal with the terrible consequences of his sins. David's life will bear the scars of his sin until his death. But his sins are forgiven. "Now the Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die," Nathan declares to David.

Edmund Fuller points out in his commentary on this passage the tremendous authority given to the Old Testament prophet and the New

Testament minister, not merely to pray that one's sins might be forgiven but to pronounce the forgiveness of sins on God's behalf. In our Reformed tradition this authority is given not only to ordained clergy such as myself but to all God's people. It is our privilege and responsibility to pronounce the forgiveness of sins. As God's people, we are to cultivate this gift that God has given to us, the priesthood of all believers.

I hope and pray that if there are those of you here this morning who are troubled by what's going on in your lives that you'll find a trusted brother or sister in Christ to whom to unburden yourself. We believe that there's no sin which you've committed that cannot be forgiven if you confess it to God and seek God's help to repent.

In one of his books, Robert Hudnut states that the biggest concept that one should receive from the pulpit is the message of reconciliation and forgiveness. People attend church out of great need, injury, and soul-deep wounds. Too often, he says, they are served some strange mixture of political science, quaint Bible study, or philosophical reflections on art.

The Church is place where we come to hear the Word of God proclaimed, to have our lives examined in the searing light of the Word of God; to confess our sins and to receive the promise of God's forgiveness.

Maybe as you've heard the story of David and his sins, the Lord has revealed to your own heart that you have sins that are unconfessed and unforgiven. The church of Jesus Christ is the institution ordained by God to

declare the forgiveness of sins. We believe in the forgiveness of sins in this church.

Don't hide your sins from yourself or from God. In Psalm 32, David wrote, "While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long... Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and did not hide my iniquity."

Confess you sin. Confess it directly to God. And often it does your heart good to find a trusted brother or sister in Christ to whom to confess.

"Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and whose spirit there is no deceit."

Let us pray: Your mercy, O Lord, is from everlasting to everlasting. May you have mercy, forgive us all our sins, strengthen us in all goodness and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep us in eternal life."