

Once upon a time, in those long-ago days of the Old Testament, God sent a man to tell a story to a king. Not just any king, but the most loved King of Israel, a man God had once called “a man after God’s own heart”, King David. Stories can be very effective ways of telling the truth, of helping someone see what is going on around them, and although King David had once been in a good relationship with God and his people, things had changed with him, he had made some choices that were contradictory to those Ten Commandments God gave the People of God back in the wilderness days of Exodus. In hopes of remedying the situation, to call David back to God, God sent Nathan to tell David a story.

The story Nathan told was about two men, one rich, one poor, both of whom lived in the same city. The rich man had what you might say was everything his heart desired: land, flocks of livestock, money, power etc. etc. etc. The poor man had no land and no livestock except for a ewe lamb he had bought and raised like one of his own children and grew as dear as a family pet to the poor man. One day the rich man had a visitor come to his door, and although the laws of hospitality demanded the rich man slaughter one of his sheep to feed the traveler, the rich man just didn’t want to be without one of his many sheep. So, he took the poor man’s pet sheep instead and slaughtered it for his dinner. The end.

It’s a very sad story, the story Nathan told King David, one without a happy ending. After David heard the story he was very angry at the selfish abuse of power the rich man displayed by taking what didn’t belong to him. And when asked what should be done about such a situation, David angrily said the rich man should pay back four times the amount of the ewe, and then have to pay for the injustice with his life.

That’s a pretty intense response to the story. But while David had such an angry response to a character in the story, he had failed to recognize the story was really about him.

Before Nathan was sent by God to tell David this story, David had done some ewe stealing of his own, only it wasn’t a sheep, it was a woman named Bathsheba, and she was another man’s wife. Instead of going to war one spring, David chose to stay behind in his palace, with his wives and harem and all the stuff he had, but somehow that wasn’t enough. One day he saw a woman bathing and instead of averting his eyes, of realizing he may have been someplace he shouldn’t have been, or giving the woman privacy to bathe on her own roof, he gawked and he coveted. He

asked someone who this woman was and was told she is someone's daughter and wife, but after hearing this, David didn't stop and think that maybe he was objectifying a human being. He wanted what he wanted. So, he sent for her, in a way apparently where she wasn't able to say no, he used her for his pleasure and then sent her away. When she sent word that she was pregnant, David sent for her husband, but he failed to follow David's plans by refusing to partake of the comforts of home when his fellow soldiers were fighting and going without those comforts. Instead of being impressed by the man's loyalty to his fellow soldiers, and reflect on how different that was from his own behavior, David sent the man to the front lines of battle, so he'd be killed, and once he was dead, David married the woman. But that hardly made the situation right. David had managed to break quite a few of the Commandments of God, even though all along the way there were opportunities for him to step back, to reflect on what he was doing, where he was going, and to ask himself why he wanted what he wanted badly enough to break those Commandments of God.

Terry Pratchett, one of my favorite novelists, has written, "The purpose of rules is that they make us stop and think before we break them." And while that may be one of the reasons God gave God's People the 10 Commandments, in this case, it certainly wasn't working that way. David went from coveting, to stealing, to deception, to murder without a single pause for reflecting on what he was doing and why. It wasn't until he heard Nathan's story that he thought about such behaviors at all. But even then, he didn't realize that he was guilty of the same crime as the rich man in Nathan's story until Nathan told him those painfully true words: "You are the man."

Perhaps how David responded to the truth Nathan told is why David was a "man after God's own heart." David did not blame Bathsheba, or his own wives, he did not call Nathan a liar or deny anything. He acknowledged it was all true, and crumpled as only David and his penchant for drama could. And God, showed David mercy, God forgave him, yet David still had to live with the consequences of what he had done with the resolve to keep his power in check, to not succumb to the temptation to use his power as king to avoid facing whatever it was he had been going through, be it boredom, aging, fear, grief, or the other stuff of life that can be hard to face.

It was an effective story Nathan told, because it spoke truth to power yet did so in love, it allowed David to face for himself the sin he had committed without condemning him, for it was David who passed the harsh judgment on himself. This allowed Nathan to remind David of how God responds to such injustice, to forgive, while allowing a person to live with the consequences of their actions in hopes they will learn from them, and change.

This was not the only time God sent someone to tell stories to the powerful. We heard another account of such storytelling in our Gospel reading this morning, where Jesus told a dramatically violent parable to the religious leaders of his time. The parable, often called the parable of the wicked tenants, is not often mentioned when people talk about their favorite or beloved parables. It sounds harsh, it is full of violence, and much like the story Nathan told David, it does not have a happy ending. So, it is a parable that can make us uncomfortable.

Lots of scholars and commentators have tried to make this parable less troublesome for us modern readers of the Bible by reminding us Matthew's community was dealing with a lot of stress caused by the mainstream religious community of the time and Matthew's writings often reflect this by casting religious leaders in a poor light. Too often this has led to what I believe is an unintended anti-Semitic interpretation of this parable and the comments Jesus made afterward.

That is one way to make this parable not be about any of us, though, isn't it? It's always safer to try and find a common enemy to point the finger to, instead of recognizing how that finger might be pointing back at us, at you or me. After all, that is how David first responded to the story Nathan told him.

Maybe that is just part of human nature and that is why we all need stories like this, to help us view our behavior from a different vantage point. The leaders in Jesus' day, and in some ways the people too, had fallen away from following God's ways and were worshipping the god of Roman power instead of God, they were all guilty of rejecting not only the prophets who attempted to speak to them, they rejected Jesus as well. This is what most scholars tell us is at the heart of this parable: the rejection of God's messengers and God's Son.

But what I find most interesting about today's Gospel isn't the parable, it is the question Jesus asked the religious leaders: the question about how they would handle the situation, what judgement they would pass on the tenants, as that question sounds a lot like what Nathan asked David after he told him his story. It wasn't Jesus who threatened violence against the tenants, it was the religious leaders who did so, just like David did to himself.

The author of Matthew's Gospel goes on to have Jesus talk about the corner stone that will be rejected, and how those who reject the stone will destroy themselves by doing so, yet the stone itself will still rise to its proper place. While it is easy to see the violence in this, and be distracted by that violence, especially in light of all the recent events, there is more to Jesus' words. The violence is what those who reject the cornerstone will do and experience, yet not even the horrific violence of the crucifixion stopped God from raising Jesus from the dead after Jesus' crucifixion. Which may not stop people from perpetuating terrible acts of violence, but does

remind us those violent acts are not the all there is, they are not the end, there is Resurrection, which may not look like the dead victims returning to this life, but it can look like healing, it can look like living together for something larger than ourselves, it can be a renewed effort to find ways to create authentic community. It can look like any number of ways we face any story or tragedy with the courage to see what part of the story we have participated in, how we have not been as reflective as we could with our choices and behaviors, and think seriously about what we can and need to change, starting with ourselves, to live closer into God's dream for us.

The wonderful power of the Resurrection is that it can help us live into the shared accountability for our choices without succumbing to shame or blame because Resurrection reminds us there is more to every story, there is God raising the dead to new life, there is hope of redemption for the sinner that breaks the destructive cycle of violence.

Which means Jesus' parable can be a powerfully appropriate parable in these modern days of the church. When we as church goers are constantly bombarded with reports and surveys and polls and articles and blogs telling us what we can see around us: that there are fewer and fewer people attending churches today, that more people are speaking out about the ways churches or church leaders have hurt them or family members who have rejected them in the name of religion, even in the name of those commandments God gave God's people, there is a lot of truth staring us in the face. It is too easy to judge the people who don't go to church as bad, and write them off, because that makes them a common enemy and helps church goers feel a little more comfortable with ourselves. But even though that sounds like how the religious leaders responded to Jesus, that isn't going to help the situation.

Perhaps the reality is more complicated, and harder. And we as the church can learn from both King David and the religious leaders in Matthew's Gospel in how to respond to the stories we are being told. We can be angry, like the religious leaders, and ignore or blame or try to get rid of the source of our discomfort. Or, like David, we can listen. It's not easy to hear what we don't want to hear. That's where good storytellers can help because they can point out behaviors without shaming or demeaning or dehumanizing, which helps the listener enter into the story. And we can admit when we are wrong, ask for forgiveness, and use that to reflect on how we got in the situation we are in, to live with the consequences with grace, and change what we feel we need to change.

That last part might be especially challenging, especially if the world wants to punish us or we want to punish ourselves, rather than help each other live into Resurrection life. And that is why further reflection is important. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus shows us God is not about punishing, God is about redeeming. It is our task as a church to remind the world of this truth.

Which means this whole situation is not one-sided. Perhaps part of the problem is we as a church have not been as effective truth tellers as we could be. That is where we can learn from folks like Nathan, and Jesus, and speak truth to power in love. We can do that by accepting responsibility for our sins, we can name our fears as we reflect on the cause of our sin, and we can resolve to live into God's redeeming love by telling our story to the world. By showing the world God's love isn't about naming sin without forgiving, God's love isn't about calling out without compassion, God's love isn't about pointing out sin without sharing the pain of the consequences of sin together while living together toward a renewed effort to live what we believe.

Perhaps in these times this is more important than ever, to listen to the stories God is challenging us to hear and to tell the stories God is calling us to tell to the world; stories of the truth of God's redeeming, abusive cycle breaking love.