

“Mirror”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

2 Samuel 12:1-9

October 7, 2018

World Communion Sunday

We had flown from Duluth, Minnesota to Chicago’s O’Hare airport and it was 9 p.m. and we were exhausted. We just wanted to get on a plane and land in Birmingham and get home and feed the cat and flop into bed.

Instead, we found ourselves in line at the airline customer service desk with a bunch of other weary souls whose flights had been canceled. When we got to the front of the line, I decided I would do the talking, as between me and my wife, I was better at sweet-talking my way into getting some help. But this man wouldn’t budge. Not only couldn’t we leave until the next morning, but there was no room at any inn for us. There was no way he could help us. We’d be provided a cot in a noisy and brightly-lit hallway and a few bucks for breakfast.

I was, of course, absolutely delightful through the discussion with the man behind the desk. I was my usual calm, friendly, understanding self. I’m a professional nice person — it’s almost literally in my job description. But this guy was getting snippy with me. As we talked, he got more and more belligerent. I showed heroic patience only raising my voice a half a notch when he exhaled loudly in frustration. I was reasonable. I was polite. We were going to be sleeping on the floor. As we left to claim our cots, I was angry, but glad I’d kept my cool.

And then my wife took on the role of Nathan the Prophet. She did not use a parable. She’s a bit more... direct. She told me that I’d been rude to the man behind the desk, that I’d lost my temper and been snarly and embarrassing and horrible.

I’d like to say I relented immediately and admitted my fault and thanked her for putting me in my place. In reality, I stormed off in the general direction of the closest wildly overpriced magazine and candy emporium. But as we made camp among the other First World Problem refugees, it hit me that the person in this world who knows me the best most likely wasn’t telling me I’d been a jerk just to see what it was like to spend the evening sleeping at the airport next to an angry person. She had every reason to let it slide for her own sake. So maybe she had heard and seen something I couldn’t and maybe she was simply telling me the truth about myself.

It’s hard to tell someone you love or admire or respect that they’re out of line. Now, imagine the stakes are higher and the person you need to hold the mirror to is the revered king, and if he doesn’t like what you say, he can turn you into the Prophet, Formerly-Known-As-Alive. And this revered king isn’t just revered right now, but he’s the most famous king in the history of Israel.

He is King David — singer of psalms, chosen and anointed, picked by God, slayer of giants, the future, the hope of the people. For Christians, he is the defining ancestor of Jesus. David is a hero. He is the one through whom God works!¹ If this guy messes up, it takes guts to stand up to him. If this guy is so capable of evil, it makes it a curious decision to keep this story as part of scripture. Shouldn’t some pious person have scrubbed the record of David’s misdeeds?

¹ Ted A. Smith at https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=355

Well, they've tried. When David's story is told in the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, the story of Bathsheba is cut out. Later, the 1951 film *David and Bathsheba*, with Susan Hayward and Gregory Peck in the title roles, paints David as a sensitive king looking for someone to love him and Bathsheba as a lonely wife, and they fall in love. Their sin in the film is betraying Uriah together, but they are star-crossed lovers. And over the ages, many have read this story and blamed — I know this is going to shock you! — they've blamed Bathsheba for the whole thing. She seduced the king, you see. If the king must be tarnished, we'll blame it on the woman.²

Yet the biblical account indicates none of that. The story, as told in 2 Samuel, is problematic to our ears, of course. Bathsheba has no voice in this telling. Nathan's parable is only concerned with the violence and violation toward Uriah. It counts Bathsheba as property. It seems that if Bathsheba hadn't been married, David's treatment of her would have been chalked up to "Boys will be boys. King's gonna king." Given those troubling problems, the part of David's reign that included such misogyny and vulgar disregard for life and family and relationship is preserved for the people of God to hear and grapple with, and there must be a reason for that.

Perhaps, patriarchy and all, we get this story so we can see that it is a holy act to speak truth to power. It is bold and prophetic and faithful for Nathan to call out his king — "You are that man!" God's Spirit knows that, from time to time, we need a mirror held up to us to remind us who we are.

We can have such distorted, funhouse mirror images of ourselves. I meet people just about every day who need a prophetic mirror to show them the truth — that they are beloved, despite what they've heard from bullies in politics and culture and churches. And you need about ten seconds on the internet to find people who need a mirror to help them see how ridiculous and callous and mean they are.

Here's a bad way to spend a few hours: watching YouTube apology videos. I'm talking about folks who have gained some notoriety from posting videos on YouTube — about animals or how to put on makeup or videos of themselves playing video games — and then do something incredibly dumb. They get caught with their racism showing. Or they get so excited about their minor celebrity that they believe their own hype and act like divas and end up alienating all of their fans. When something like that happens, what inevitably follows is the Apology Video.

These videos are impossibly long and painfully predictable after you've seen a few. They can't believe this happened. They know they've let everyone down. Here come the tears. But then the weird thing happens — in a huge number of these videos, the apology turns toward how hard all this has been...for *them*. And you realize that not only do you need to not spend so much time on YouTube, but that the person apologizing hasn't quite seen the mirror. Their view of things is still distorted.

We seem to really struggle with seeing reality.

Louisiana. New Mexico. Mississippi. West Virginia. Those are the states with higher child poverty rates than Alabama. If you confine the numbers to children under 6, we fall behind Mississippi. That child poverty rate is just under 25%, and it's over 11% if you only look for extremely poor children.³

² Ted A. Smith

³<https://www.childrensdefense.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Child-Poverty-in-America-2017-State-Fact-Sheet.pdf>

If we are looking to name evil — if we are searching for the courage of Nathan — we could do a lot worse than to start with those numbers.

Where is the good news here? We start with the ever-present reminder that God works through brokenness. Broken systems and broken people are the potter's clay — because none are unbroken, and God is faithful, and if King David is redeemable, so are we. For Christians, that connection to this broken king reminds us of Advent hymns and Christmas Eve readings. Jesus is the consummate mirror-holder-upper. The poor and bedraggled and marginalized he reflected as beloved and favored and cherished. The powerful and hypocritical and self-serving he frequently met with parables that started "A certain man..."

Let us reflect God's lovingkindness and justice and peace.

Let us be bold in speaking truth — not recklessly, but in relationships built on trust and grace.

Let us not fear power, but hold it accountable to the cries of the vulnerable and the marginalized and those who get cut out of the story.

Let us be courageous in willing to hear that we have erred from those with the love to tell us.

Let us be free to see that in our brokenness and with our scars, we are created to be loved and redeemed and renewed by our Creator. Amen.