

THE SOAP OPERA OF OUR OWN GREED

7/29/18 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Proper 12 (Year B): 2 Samuel 11:1-15; Psalm 14; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

Wow! What do you think about that reading from 2nd Samuel? Here's King David basically forcing an affair on Bathsheba; it doesn't say that, but obviously in her time, if the King demands you come to his room, you go. Then she becomes pregnant; and to add insult to injury David tries to cover his own tracks so that people won't suspect he's the baby daddy, and, finally, demands that her husband be killed!

Who needs soap operas, right? So much for the strong family values of the Bible. Scripture is filled with the stories of God's people being people...even God's chosen are only human. And David's human appetite for "more" is out of control! His greed shows up in all kinds of ways; he wants more conquests, grander victories, and most importantly, greater power!

A few weeks ago, we read an earlier story about David, and I pointed out how most of us would rather look away from these kinds of stories. I can't seem to stop thinking about that. On that same day, at our Faith and Literature series, we discussed a John Updike novel, where there was a similar response: "Why are we reading this kind of book in a church group?"

Granted the novel isn't a flowery book about the beauty of God's love, but the storyline isn't that much different than this passage from 2nd Samuel. In my prior sermon, I suggested that one of the reasons we must be willing to look at the messiness of life is so that we can help. If we don't see the mess, we can't help, and our call as Disciples of Christ is to help.

But I think there's another important reason we have to be willing to look at the greed, the deceit, the scandal and other immorality around us. I'm sure you've heard the saying: "There but for the grace of God, go I." We'd like to think we're living lives that won't get us into a disgraceful predicament, and, yet, many of us teeter on the edge of immoral situations.

We're reminded that, yes, David is one of God's chosen, but even King David misuses God's power. We read novels that describe the realities of life, in all its complications, so that we remember that, "there but for the grace of God, go I." And in our gratitude—in our awareness—we can then do things differently. We can repent and turn back to God and God's love.

Now, I'm not suggesting that any of you are in the throes of something like David did, but I am suggesting that our lives can slip out of control in so many ways; in a matter of a split second our lives can be forever changed.

In the novel I just finished, for example, a child nearly drowns. Six responsible adults were all nearby, but they all looked away from the toddler playing near a fountain for just a couple of minutes as they shared a story and laughed about it. The narrator comments that the typical response is: "That should not happen; someone should have been watching that child more closely." And most of us would probably respond the same way, because we don't want to imagine that it could happen to us. Our child couldn't develop a substance abuse disorder; our family would never have to file bankruptcy; our spouse would never cheat, etc.

So, we see David and his greed, and we want to try and pretend his story has nothing to do with us. But if we look closely, we can probably begin to see ourselves in that light. Don't we all want more in some ways? We want more vacation time, more security in our home, more nice things. I don't like admitting it, but—even though I have everything I need—I catch myself wanting a bigger home, a nicer car, more stylish clothes...more, more, more!

In contrast, we find Jesus creating more; instead of wanting more, Jesus creates more...more food, more fellowship...more community. Some of you heard me talk about what most impressed me at The Episcopal Church-wide Convention in Austin earlier this month. I said it was about inclusivity, which it was. But we couldn't have reached the place of passing resolutions that encourage inclusivity without first looking at all the ways in which people are excluded from The Episcopal Church.

We first had to admit that people were being abused and assaulted in church-settings, before making a plan to help prevent that. We had to first admit that not making concessions for limited-ability people is disrespectful, before planning to do that differently. We had to honestly admit the places where our greed or need for power gets in the way.

As I mentioned, that greed or desire for power comes in many forms. This week many of you read the letter sent to us from Tyler, the young man who's facing three felony charges of arson after starting the two fires on our campus, and one at the school up the street a year and a half ago (if you didn't see the letter, there's a copy on the bulletin board in the Parish Hall). He explains that these were not crimes of greed in the way we would normally think.

But his motives did come from a place of wanting more of something. Tyler was suffering from anxiety, addiction and escalating family problems. I'm guessing his need for more, was relief or escape from the mounting problems in his life. He talks about how he would drink to the point of blacking-out, and then not remember what he'd done during those times. Sadly, his need to escape has essentially cost him his life.

And wouldn't we rather look away from the realities of that as well? We don't want to know about someone who has those kinds of issues. We have our own challenges, and, as Reverend Richard pointed out last week, many of us suffer from compassion fatigue. But I can't get over the idea that Tyler grew up right around the corner from here. He faced these problems right here in our neighborhood. He was here suffering, and his suffering became so unbearable he acted out in ways that will never be able to be undone.

What really grabbed me, in his letter, was that until his attorney informed him that my correspondence indicated we are praying for him, Tyler had not imagined that someone he hurt could pray for him; and that, knowing that, has him thinking about how he can forgive and pray for those who have hurt him.

We can't undo what Tyler lived through, but we can keep asking how we can help more people around us become aware of God's love through our efforts to be the hands and feet of God in our neighborhood, in our workplaces, and in our schools.

We can offer the "more" that Jesus offered to those around him: more forgiveness, more compassion, more love. The miracle of that day when Jesus asked the disciples how they could afford food for all those people wasn't that the food multiplied. The miracle was that all those people were fed. They were fed by the compassionate words that were spoken; they were fed by the friendly hospitality they found; they were fed by the offering of love.

At the same time, I think one of the ways that we avoid compassion fatigue is by remembering we are not Jesus. We are called to follow in his footsteps, but it's not us—not even his closest disciples—who walk on water; it's Jesus who walks on water. We are not our neighbors' savior; Jesus is the savior.

Our role is to carry on; to do our best; to help in the ways that we can help. At the same time, Jesus models something very important: we make do with what we have. They had five loaves of bread, and two fishes (and I'm betting a lot more food than other people were willing to share once they realized others were hungry). They made the most of what they had and carried on.

We make the most of what we have—the gifts we possess, the time we are able to commit, the passion we have for a particular activity—and we offer that. We don't desire more, or get greedy about wanting greater gifts, more passion, or a ton of more time ... we just do what we can do, making use of what we have.

In contrast to the scriptural passages we'd like to look away from, our reading from Ephesians provides a place to lean into. The Apostle Paul offers up God as our source and our center. He writes: "May your inner being be strengthened with power through God's Spirit, and may Christ dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love."

He continues: "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

Isn't that reassuring? Yes, "There but by the grace of God go I," but at the same time, all we need do is to breathe in ... stand in ...

claim for our own knowing: "the breadth, length, height, and depth of God's love"—God's power—which Paul reminds us "is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine."

-AMEN

Collect of the Day:

O God, the protector of all who trust in you, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy: Increase and multiply upon us your mercy; that, with you as our ruler and guide, we may so pass through things temporal, that we lose not the things eternal; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

2 Samuel 11:1-15

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him; they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.

It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house. The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."

So David sent word to Joab, "Send me Uriah the Hittite." And Joab sent Uriah to David. When Uriah came to him, David asked how Joab and the people fared, and how the war was going. Then David said to Uriah, "Go down to your house, and wash your feet." Uriah went out of the king's house, and there followed him a present from the king. But Uriah slept at the entrance of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and did not go down to his house. When they told David, "Uriah did not go down to his house," David said to Uriah, "You have just come from a journey. Why did you not go down to your house?" Uriah said to David, "The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing." Then David said to Uriah, "Remain here today also, and tomorrow I will send you back." So Uriah remained in Jerusalem that day. On the next day, David invited him to eat and drink in his presence and made him drunk; and in the evening he went out to lie on his couch with the servants of his lord, but he did not go down to his house.

In the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. In the letter he wrote, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and then draw back from him, so that he may be struck down and die."

Psalm 14

- 1 The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God." *
All are corrupt and commit abominable acts;
there is none who does any good.
- 2 The LORD looks down from heaven upon us all, *
to see if there is any who is wise,
if there is one who seeks after God.
- 3 Every one has proved faithless;
all alike have turned bad; *
there is none who does good; no, not one.
- 4 Have they no knowledge, all those evildoers *
who eat up my people like bread
and do not call upon the LORD?
- 5 See how they tremble with fear, *
because God is in the company of the righteous.
- 6 Their aim is to confound the plans of the afflicted, *
but the LORD is their refuge.
- 7 Oh, that Israel's deliverance would come out of Zion! *
when the LORD restores the fortunes of his people,
Jacob will rejoice and Israel be glad.

Ephesians 3:14-21

I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

John 6:1-21

Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost." So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."

When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. But he said to them, "It is I; do not be afraid." Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.