

Abuse: Still Not Getting It

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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1 Samuel 11:1-6a, 15b, 26-27

During the fighting season that spring, David sent Joab, along with his servants and all the Israelites, and they destroyed the Ammonites, attacking the city of Rabbah. But David stayed in Jerusalem.

One evening, David got up from his couch and was pacing back and forth on the roof of the royal residence. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. And the woman was very beautiful. David sent to find out about the woman and was told, “Isn’t that Bathsheba, Eliam’s daughter, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?” So David sent ‘messengers’ and took her. And when she came to him, he had sex with her. (She had been purifying herself from her uncleanness.) Then she returned to her house.

Now the woman conceived, and she sent word to David: “I’m pregnant.” So David sent a message to Joab: “Put Uriah at the point of the fiercest fighting, and then pull back from him so that he will be struck down and die.”

When Uriah’s wife heard that her husband Uriah was dead, she mourned for her husband. After the time of mourning was over, David sent for her and brought her back to his house. She became his wife and bore him a son.

But what David had done displeased the Lord.

Psalm 51 (CEB)

For the music leader.

A psalm of David,

when the prophet Nathan came to him

just after he had been with Bathsheba.

Have mercy on me, God,
according to your faithful love!

Wipe away my wrongdoings
according to your great compassion!

Wash me completely clean of my guilt;
purify me from my sin!

Because I know my wrongdoings,
my sin is always right in front of me.

I’ve sinned against you—you alone.

I’ve committed evil in your sight.

That’s why you are justified
when you render your verdict,

completely correct
when you issue your judgment.
Yes, I was born in guilt, in sin,
from the moment my mother conceived me.
And yes, you want truth
in the most hidden places;
you teach me wisdom
in the most secret space.

Purify me with hyssop and I will be clean;
wash me and I will be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and celebration again;
let the bones you crushed
rejoice once more.
Hide your face from my sins;
wipe away all my guilty deeds!
Create a clean heart for me, God;
put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me!
Please don't throw me
out of your presence;
please don't take your holy spirit
away from me.
Return the joy of your salvation to me
and sustain me with a willing spirit.
Then I will teach wrongdoers your ways,
and sinners will come back to you.

Deliver me from violence, God,
God of my salvation,
so that my tongue can sing
of your righteousness.
Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth
will proclaim your praise.
You don't want sacrifices.
If I gave an entirely burned offering,
you wouldn't be pleased.
A broken spirit is my sacrifice, God.
You won't despise a heart, God,
that is broken and crushed.
Do good things for Zion by your favor.
Rebuild Jerusalem's walls.

Then you will again want
sacrifices of righteousness—
entirely burned offerings
and complete offerings.
Then bulls will again be sacrificed
on your altar.

Sermon

Abuse is real. It happens. It happens more than we realize. It happens more than we dare acknowledge. It happens in our homes. It happens in our churches. It happens here.

But they're such a nice couple!

But he's such a good father!

But she's such a committed Sunday school teacher!

Yes. And King David was a man after God's own heart. But he was an abuser.

That's not how we usually think of David. That's because we miss the point. That's because we have been acculturated to miss the point, to not recognize abuse when we see it. Pick up a typical Bible, and the heading above 2 Samuel 11 says *David's Adultery with Bathsheba* or something along those lines. Adultery? I don't think so. David was a sexual predator. And Bathsheba was his victim.

Bathsheba was minding her own business. She was in the interior courtyard of her home. She was following the law of Moses by taking a purifying bath. That's when David caught sight of her. That's when David decided he had to have her. And he took her. And he used her. And he sent her home.

When Bathsheba let David know that he had made her pregnant, David added abuse to abuse, all in an effort to cover his tracks. In the end, he saw to it that Bathsheba's husband would be killed. Then he claimed her as his own wife.

This is not a story about adultery. Adultery implies some kind of partnership in the act. But Bathsheba was not David's partner. She was his victim. When the king sent some muscle to take her back to his place, how could she object? He was the good shepherd of Israel! He was the king! He was the LORD's anointed! David had power – power over Bathsheba and, as would become clear, power over Bathsheba's husband. What could Bathsheba do? She was vulnerable. She had no power. She had no voice. She had nowhere to turn.

But we've been taught to think of David and Bathsheba as a couple, a naughty couple, but still a couple, a couple who got caught up in the sin of adultery. Yes, David was committing adultery. But that was the least of his sins!

Bonnie Nicholas is the director of the Christian Reformed Church's *Safe Church Ministry*. One of the most common themes she hears is that, when it comes to abuse, people just don't get it. We don't recognize abuse as abuse.

That lack of recognition has been aided and abetted by well-meaning Sunday school teachers and ministers and even by the Bible itself. Together they have taught us that David recognized his sin and confessed it. It's right there in the next chapter of 2 Samuel.

The prophet Nathan confronts David. He tells David a parable about a rich man who took a poor man's lamb and served it to a guest for supper. David reacts with outrage at the injustice of it. That's when Nathan springs his trap. He says to David, "You are that man!" Then David, cut to the heart, confesses his sin. That's the next chapter in 2 Samuel. And on top of that, we also have Psalm 51. In Psalm 51, David owns up to his sin.

But you know what? David doesn't get it! He really doesn't get it. He says to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD" (2 Samuel 12:13). And in the psalm, he prays to God: "Against you, you alone, have I sinned" (Psalm 51:4). Really?

David, really? You didn't sin against your muscle men by sending them to get Bathsheba for you? You didn't sin against Bathsheba by using your power to force yourself on her? You didn't sin against Bathsheba's husband by claiming her for yourself? You didn't sin against Joab and his soldiers by involving them in a conspiracy to kill Bathsheba's husband? And you didn't sin against Bathsheba's husband by plotting his death?

Against you, you alone, have I sinned? Hardly! But David doesn't get it. He doesn't seem to grasp the enormity of what he did, what he did to real, flesh and blood people, to people made, like him, in the image of God. He certainly reflects no awareness that he has abused Bathsheba.

And he's not the only one. The prophet Nathan doesn't get it either. Nathan tells a parable about a poor man having his lamb stolen away. But that's only part of the story, isn't it? The poor man wasn't wronged only in having his lamb stolen. He was also wronged in having his own life taken! And what about the lamb? In Nathan's parable the lamb, of course, is Bathsheba. But in that parable, there's no concern about any wrong done to the lamb. The concern is only for the lamb's owner. Nathan doesn't get it that Bathsheba, too, was abused by the king.

Now, of course, the prophet Nathan and King David lived at a different time and in a different culture. In that time and in that culture, women were valued too little and their person protected not enough.

I don't know if you ever watch old movies. But you can see the same sort of thing there. Sometimes those old movies are hard to watch. They may have compelling plots and interesting dialogue. But too often, women are treated badly: scolded like misbehaving children, pushed around, told to shut up, threatened with violence. And this isn't just by the bad guys. It's by the good guys, too. I don't know if things were really that bad back in the day. But I sure know that's not the way it was supposed to be!

And we haven't gotten over those cultural ideas either. We still live and move and have our being in a world where strong people use their power against weak people. And so women are physically and sexually and emotionally abused. And so babies are shaken, toddlers are yelled at, pre-schoolers are slapped, and middle-schoolers are beaten. And it's not just underemployed men wearing tank tops who do this sort of thing. People with good jobs, nice

homes, and clean reputations do it, too. And so often the women and the children – it's almost always women and children – so often the women and the children suffer in silence. And they have nowhere safe to turn.

Put yourself in Bathsheba's sandals. Where could she go? Who could she turn to? Who would believe her? And if anyone did believe her, who would dare to help her? It's a dangerous thing to stand in the way of an abuser, especially a powerful one with lots of resources: money, connections, lawyers.

Bathsheba didn't see her husband again. If she had, could she have told him? Sure. But what would the result have been? He might have stood up to David. And he would have found himself dead.

That's how it so often is with abuse. Not that people wind up dead - though that certainly does happen. But that people have no power to do anything about the abuse. Again, what people need is somewhere to turn. Somewhere safe. They need someone to talk to. Someone who will listen. Someone who will believe them. Someone who understands.

Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest – rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28-30). Jesus gets it. Jesus knows that sometimes we get beat up and abused. Jesus knows that we need to be safe. And there is safety! Jesus is safety.

And the church has a calling to be like Jesus, to be a safe place. Not only a place where abuse is not tolerated – and we do our best not even to leave opportunity for abuse to happen among us. The church is also to be a safe place where someone can come and speak up and cry out and be heard.

Listen, all of you. Hear me. Please, hear me. Women, hear me. Children, hear me. No one has the right to abuse you. No one has the right to treat you as anything other than a much loved child of God. You don't have to put up with abuse. You don't have to keep quiet. But you do need to be safe. We will be that safe place for you. We get it.

Have you been hurt? Talk to me. Talk to a member of the church council. Talk to a member of the Safe Church Team – Ruth or Bill or Martin. Are you still being hurt? Don't keep silent! We get it. And we will rally around you. We will protect you. As best we can, we will protect you.

Is someone from the church hurting you, misusing you? Talk to me. Talk to someone in the church you have confidence in. You don't have to put up with it! You don't have to endure it!

Bathsheba had no place to turn. But you, you do have a place to turn. You do have a place to turn. You do have a place to turn.