

Sermon

Proper 12B July 28, 2024

2 Sam. 11:1-15, John 6:1-21

****Warning:** Topic of sexual abuse and rape discussed

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Before I begin, I need to let you know that this was a difficult sermon to write. It will be a difficult sermon to preach. And it will be a difficult sermon to hear. If you need to get up and get some fresh air, I understand.

Let's begin.

“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. But David remained at Jerusalem.”

So begins one of the most famous stories in all of scripture, that of David and Bathsheba.

King David had many wives, and out of them all, Bathsheba is without a doubt the most famous. Over the centuries, this story has become the subject of many stories, films, and commentaries. Some versions have Bathsheba playing the part of a temptress, bathing outside in public view to attract the king's attention. Others portray this story as a willing, adulterous affair between two consenting adults. Still others contend that she was a victim of King David's desires and unchecked power. How we write about and portray this story not only shows how we view it, but it can also shape how others view it.

For instance, one commentary I read says this:

“Although feminist biblical interpretation contends that Bathsheba was a victim of David, other scholars find a clue to Bathsheba's complicity among King David's wives in 2 Sam. 11:4. This verse says unequivocally that when David sent messengers to fetch her, she went to David of her own free will.”

Did you catch that? The author says, “*feminist biblical interpretation . . . but other scholars,*” implying that the former aren't scholars, just a type of interpreter with a

particular ax to grind. The author also writes, “*this verse says unequivocally.*” But look at that verse in your bulletins. This is far from unequivocal, because when the king sends messengers (most likely an armed escort), you go.

What interpretations like this do is they minimize the complicity and responsibility of David. Giving Bathsheba even an ounce of responsibility begins to move her toward being an equal player, and it allows us to excuse David for his behavior. After all, she was bathing in public, she must have known what she was doing. They were only messengers, she could have said, “No.”

But the reality here is that she had ***NOTHING*** to do with this situation. First, even though she was bathing outdoors, she was in a place otherwise removed from public view. Notice the reading says David saw her from the roof. It's clear she wasn't “out in the open.” This is another indication of the power differential, as David is portrayed as being over her. David could have turned away, but he continued to spy on her from above without her knowing it. David has become a royal peeping Tom.

Second, he uses his power and authority as king to bring her to him. A podcast I listen to every now and then called *Pulpit Fiction*, which features two pastors discussing the upcoming lectionary readings, quoted one of those feminist biblical interpreters and said, “The reason Bathsheba went with the messengers and walked to the king's house was because it saved her from the indignity of being forcefully dragged through town.” To suggest that she could have told the king's messengers, “No, I don't want to go,” carries as much plausibility as having two detectives or FBI agents show up at your door and say, “Ma'am, we think you should come down to the station with us,” and saying, “No . . . I think I'll stay here, thank you very much.”

Third, he lay with her. Based on how Uriah will react later in the story when David brings him home from the war, we can assume that Uriah and Bathsheba had a strong, loyal marriage. How much “coercing” did David have to do to in order to get her into bed? Or maybe there wasn't any coercing. Maybe David did this by force. I am willing to bet my bottom dollar this encounter was only consensual in David's eyes; and that makes it rape, not an affair.

I'll admit that I didn't always think about this story this way. I used to be in the “Sure, David sinned, but Bathsheba wasn't an innocent bystander” camp. I've since changed my mind, starting when the women in my seminary class pointed out some of the same points I just did.

The reality is that David was king, and he used his position and his power to take what he wanted. This action and attitude of entitlement by men in power, and/or by men who claim they were just having fun, has gone on for as long as there have been men and women in the world. We as a society need to get past the “boys will be boys” attitude and begin demanding accountability for inappropriate behavior. We, as men, need to set better examples and do better in general. We need to start listening to and respecting women and their stories.

If you think this is something that I am blowing out of proportion, or that I'm over-reacting, let me share this with you:

A few years ago, back when I was on Twitter, long before it became X, I came across a Twitter post a week or so before this reading came up. On that post someone asked this question:

Dear Women: How old were you when older men started approaching you?

The answers were devastating.

I was 11. 8. 12.

6 when it started.

9. 13.

10 the first time.

11. 9.

12, and I never lied about my age.

8.

I was in 5th Grade.

And on and on and on and on. Some told their stories. Some just gave their age.

Bathsheba was a married woman whose husband was away at war, which may be why she is sometimes seen as being complicit in this encounter. But she is only one example of the many stories I have pointed out, and the many more I haven't, of men using their position, power, influence, and sometimes brute strength to inflict bad, inappropriate, and damaging behavior on women and girls.

We have to stop implicating girls, women, and victims in general in their own abuse. We have to stop the excuses that she was dressed too provocatively, or that she was flirting, or that she was bathing outside. We have to start recognizing that girls and women are **not responsible** for a man's behavior, whether that man is a peasant, king, president, citizen, or anywhere in-between.

For the record, there are many men, and many men whom I know, who have never touched a girl or woman without their consent or made inappropriate comments. There are many men who have never used their position as David used his position. Not all men have inappropriately pursued, commented on, touched, or abused women. But all women have a story about these types of encounters. They may not have all been raped, but they all have stories of inappropriate behavior inflicted on them.

While this isn't about the men who haven't behaved this way, this is most certainly about the hundreds of thousands, or maybe millions, of girls and women who have suffered unwanted comments, advances, touching, or outright rape at the hands of men who felt entitled to do so. This is about the results of men who view women as objects, as temptresses, or as any other reason for their behavior. This is about men who view this behavior as simply "having a bit of fun," or "just joking around," because their position and power allow them to do so.

David used his position and power to break wedding vows. He used his position and power to break a life by having Uriah killed. He used his position and power to break the will of the woman he raped and to bring her under his control by marrying her.

Today's gospel, believe it or not, ties in with all of this. Today we hear John's version of the feeding of the 5000 - the first, by the way, in a five-week series called, "The Bread of Life Discourse." In all four gospels this story involves the miraculous feeding of at least 5000 people by Jesus with only five loaves and two fish. And in all four gospels, the disciples collect twelve baskets of broken pieces after the people have finished eating.

Later in this series Jesus will say, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry." And in today's passage he tells the disciples to gather up the fragments (or, as another gospel says, the broken pieces) so that none may be lost.

Looking at the life of Jesus, he never once used his position and power to coerce, belittle, or abuse people. He was around girls and women as much as any other man of the day, but never once did he do anything inappropriate. As one of our Eucharistic Prayers says, "He lived as one of us, yet without sin." Instead of using his position and power to the detriment of others, he used his position and power to feed and heal people. We who are Christians should look to his example. And we men should be especially diligent that our actions feed and heal, not discourage, abuse, and break.

Another thing we can do is to flip this around - that is, instead of thinking about Jesus as the bread, think about girls and women as the bread. To do this, I'm going to draw on Mark and Luke who said there were about 5000 men. When the men were finished, there was nothing but broken pieces. The disciples gathered up twelve baskets of those broken pieces so that nothing was lost. Not all men left broken pieces behind, but all the bread was broken.

Like the disciples gathered up the broken pieces of bread, the Church must be willing to gather up girls and women who have been broken to some extent by abusive men so that none may be lost.

The number of women who have had a Bathsheba experience is astounding and frightening. She wasn't the first; and, unfortunately, she wasn't the last. It doesn't have to be this way, but in a world where it is, I'm here to say, "We can and must do better."

The question is, "How do we do better?" And by "we," I primarily mean, "Men."

We can do better by ensuring that there are no more Bathsheba stories.

We can do better by believing the girls and women who tell stories of being pursued, groped, abused, or taken advantage of by men.

We can do better by recognizing that Bathsheba was taken advantage of by the king.

We can do better by understanding that there are broken pieces and fragments out there who need to be carefully gathered up so that none are lost.

We can do better by understanding that there may be broken pieces right here in this building.

We can do better by beginning to see women as people with dignity, made in the image of God.

We can do better. We must do better.

How might we do this in the real world?

We can recognize that Jesus calls us to a new way of living. Jesus calls us to renounce the ways of the world and live into the ways of God. For us Episcopalians, we can look to the Baptismal Covenant for guidance.

“Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?” The abuse of girls and women by men, whether men in power or men in general, is an evil power that has broken and destroyed many girls and women. For us to renounce them means doing more than not acting that way, it also means being willing to publicly speak out and call out those actions and behaviors which can belittle, break, and destroy girls and women. Next week we will hear Nathan do that very thing when he confronts the king about today's incident. In that story, notice that Nathan never once accuses Bathsheba for David's actions – the blame lies solely with David.

We can begin by doing better in speaking out against the evil that destroys the creatures of God.

“Do you promise to follow and obey Jesus Christ?” Following Christ is hard work. It requires us to live and act in a certain way. In a few weeks Jesus will tell his followers, “For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.” Because of this, many who followed turned back to their own way. He asks the twelve if they also wish to turn away, and Peter says, “Lord, to whom can we go?” Following Jesus is hard, but to whom will we go?

“Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News?” Derogatory words and abusive behaviors are not good news; but modeling our words and life on the life-giving words and supportive behavior of Christ is.

“Will you strive for justice, and respect the dignity of every human being?” To strive for justice is to work to ensure abuse never happens, to believe those who have been abused, and to be a voice for the voiceless – six, seven, eleven-year old girls. To strive for justice is to not tolerate bad behavior and to ensure that any and all bad behavior is called out and brought to light, as Nathan will do next week.

We can do better.

We can do better by living into the words of the Baptismal Covenant and holding ourselves to a higher standard. We can do better by having men who don't engage in inappropriate, abusive behavior calling out those who do. We can do better by believing the stories of girls and women, and insisting that men speak up for those who can't.

The story of David and Bathsheba is a cautionary tale of what can happen when a man feels entitled to possess a woman.

It is a cautionary tale of what can happen when position and power blind a man to what is respectful, dignified, and appropriate.

It is a cautionary tale that tells us where we might end up if we follow David instead of Jesus.

From this day forward, we must do better.

Amen.

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