

Date: July 23, 2006

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 15

**SERMON: Truth and Consequences**

Text(s): 2 Samuel 12:1-15; Mark 6:14-29

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In Robert Graves's novel *I, Claudius*, which was made into a brilliant television series by BBC, the central character in his story of the transition of ancient Rome from a republic to a monarchy, is Livia, wife of Augustus, the first real emperor. Livia is one of the most convincingly evil villains I've ever seen portrayed on screen. The thing that makes her so convincing is that she's not a caricature; she's portrayed as intelligent, sophisticated, rational, and utterly malignant. In her single-minded quest to prevent her husband Augustus from carrying out what she considers his foolish desire to restore the Republic, she murders every potential rival to the throne and every potential supporter of a Republic. Perhaps the best characterization of her thoroughgoing evil was a line spoken as an insulting jest by one of the characters, "They say that a snake bit her once, and the snake died!"

What makes her so utterly evil, however, is that she lives a gigantic lie. She deceives herself into believing that she has committed all these murders, because she wanted what was best for Rome. Even when, on her deathbed, she fears the pains of hell and is desperate to find a way to escape by confessing what she has done, she does not do it out of desire to come clean and find forgiveness, but to justify herself by saying she did it for the good of Rome, and to manipulate the process of divine justice to her own benefit. She never once tells the truth, even to herself, that she did all these things because she enjoyed the absolute power over others which her actions gave her—the thrill of bending others to her own will, of feeling like a divinity. She never told the truth about herself and her motives to herself. She believed her own lie.

Livia is a perfect example of the evil personality M. Scott Peck described in his best-selling book *People of the Lie*. This well-known

psychiatrist characterized as evil, people who act in destructive ways in their relationships with others, but who tell lies to themselves about their motives and maintain that they are really doing what is good for the other person. He makes a helpful distinction between committing an evil act and becoming an evil person. We all commit evil acts from time to time; whether we become an evil person, a person of the lie, depends on whether we are willing to tell the truth to ourselves about our own motives and actions. People of the lie cannot bear to face that truth. "Their "goodness" is all on a level of pretense, Peck says. *It is, in effect, a lie. This is why they are the "people of the lie."* Actually the lie is designed not so much to deceive others as to deceive themselves. *They cannot or will not tolerate the pain of self-reproach.*

Facing the truth about ourselves and our motives is never easy. Jamie Buckingham once wrote a book, taking his cue from the saying of Jesus, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." His book was titled, *The Truth Will Make You Free, But First It Will Make You Miserable*. And the story of the prophet Nathan's confrontation with David that we heard this morning certainly bears that out. David will endure a fair amount of misery before he finally experiences the freedom that the truth brings.

David, as we saw last week, engaged in a horribly arrogant and lethal abuse of his royal power. While his armies were away fighting for him in a battle, he took Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, one of his lieutenants who was away fighting in David's army, and forced his sexual attentions on her. When he discovered Bathsheba was pregnant, he tried to cover up his crime by having his general Joab, arrange for Uriah to be killed in battle, thereby compounding his crime of rape by adding murder. As wicked and unjustly as David has acted, however, he is revealed in this story as a man, who in the end, opts for truth—the truth about himself and the evil he has done, even though it makes him miserable, and this preference for truth makes all the difference. Unlike Livia, he does not

ultimately become a person of the lie.

The story of the prophet Nathan's confrontation with David offers us a model of how to deal with our own evil acts in order to prevent ourselves from becoming people of the lie. There are four distinct movements or aspects. The first is that the person who has done evil and who has begun to live a lie—doing more evil to cover up, as David has done, must be confronted and the lie unmasked. This is why God invented prophets (and spouses!).

God sends Nathan to hold up a mirror into which David can look and see himself as God sees him—a sinner who has perpetrated a great injustice. I can imagine that Nathan probably wished he had become a camel driver or something instead of a prophet, but he shows great shrewdness in dealing with this willful and destructive king. He tells David a real sob-story about a rich man who has many fat sheep and another poor man who has only one small ewe lamb. The rich man in the story has a visitor and wants to show his hospitality. But instead of selecting one of his many sheep, he plundered the poor man and stole his one little lamb and cooked it for his guest. *“Now, in your opinion, O King,”* says Nathan, *“what should be done with such a person?”*

The story really gets David's goat (pun intended.) With a great deal of indignation, he explodes to Nathan, *“As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die.”* That phrase “as the Lord lives,” while it's a figure of speech, much as we would say, “By God, I'll do such and such,” is nevertheless more than that. Deep down, so deep it emerges only as an unconscious figure of speech, David recognizes that he lives in a universe where human beings are accountable for their actions to one another, and that the ultimate accountability is to the One who created humanity in God's own image. *“As the Lord lives,”* in this case is the fundamental recognition of the ground of human existence and moral accountability. It's a recognition that we

always live our lives before the face of a God, whose opening words to the people of Israel was, *“You shall be holy because I the Lord, your God, am holy.”* David shows that he knows this truth at a deep level because he feels anger when he perceives that injustice has perverted that fundamental relationship. In other words, David has a conscience which is capable of being pricked.

So, Nathan, summoning up every ounce of courage and moral authority in him, points his finger at the king and says, *“You are the man.”* What a devastating sentence! It just pierces the shell of self-deception and self-justification which David has erected in order to live with himself, and cuts him to the heart and awakens the truthful person deep inside David.

The second movement follows the unmasking of David's evil motives and deceitful and violent acts. David painfully and truthfully confesses his sin. He comes clean. He tells the truth to himself and about himself. *“I have sinned against the Lord,”* David replies to Nathan's indictment. He shows that he understands the larger theological implications of his sin. His sin against Bathsheba and Uriah is also, ultimately, a sin against the Lord. To do evil to another person is to do evil against God. God is the ultimate victim of every evil act whether petty or great which we perpetrate against one another. The cross of Jesus is the most perfect illustration of that fact. To see the cross of Christ truly is to see a God who is victimized by the sins of human beings. St. Paul who also recognized this truth said that every time we commit a sin against another person, we *“crucify the Son of God afresh and put him to open shame.”*

While most of us are not Davids with rapes or murders laid to our account, the small and petty acts of spite, of deceit, of abuse of power, of manipulation we do to others, though they may not be as great in their effects, still have the potential to do great harm. How many

marriages have been destroyed by petty power games and self-centered behavior? How many children have grown up with distorted self-images because of the petty evil of parents who needed to build up their own egos at their children's expense and never allowed themselves to see the truth of what they were doing? How many friendships have been ruined by petty betrayals. How much harm is done to relationships by idle or malicious gossip? How many of the great evils perpetrated by one nation against another, the big lies of a Hitler or Stalin were aided and abetted by the thousands of lesser and more petty betrayals of ordinary people? It's only when we, like David, tell the truth to ourselves and about ourselves, whether individually or collectively as a nation, that we can find salvation.

So David comes clean and discovers, the miracle of forgiveness. This is the third movement of dealing with evil—the experience of forgiveness and liberation from living a lie. Nathan tells him, *“The Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die.”* Confession and forgiveness has a healing power. It roots out the lies behind which we hide. Confession is simply telling the truth, and as Jesus said, the truth does indeed set us free for healing to begin to happen. Any of us who has ever truly forgiven or been forgiven by someone else knows that experience of freedom. Forgiveness frees us by opening up a space for us to begin to repair the broken relationships caused by our evil acts. We are free to begin again, wiser and chastened, but free nonetheless. Free of the guilt and compulsions that guilt causes, free of the self-condemnation which oppresses us, free of the need to keep up the pretense that our motives were really good rather than selfish. free to look at others as real persons and love them rather than as treat them as objects to serve our self-interest or to blame for our failures. That's why the Gospel is good news. It's about freedom, real freedom, freedom from guilt, freedom to love, freedom to make a

new start.

There is one freedom, however, that telling the truth to ourselves and about ourselves does not bring us, however, and that is the fourth aspect that we can see in this story. Confronting our lie, confessing our sin and experiencing forgiveness liberates us from guilt and may bring inner healing and restore us to wholeness so that we do not become evil persons, but it does not always free us or the people we've injured from the consequences of our past actions. In some cases, where the damage is reparable, the consequences of our actions can be undone, but in other cases, the damage may be such that things once done, cannot be undone. Uriah is still dead and Bathsheba still the wronged woman, the victims of David's murderous abuse of his power. And no amount of repentance on David's part can change that. The truth frees us for new relationships and new beginnings; it does not automatically free us from the consequences of past evil acts. Nathan's word to David is not only, *“The Lord has put away your sin,”* but also *“Thus saith the Lord, the sword shall never depart from your house.”* And in the stories about David which follow, that word holds. David's violent and unjust actions unleash a chain of events that has a domino effect. Whether you call it the law of unintended consequences or *karma*, our actions set in motion events that take on a life of their own, and these events, themselves, become the judgment on our evil actions. Both David's own family and his kingdom are torn by strife to the point where his favorite son Absalom leads a bloody revolt against his father, and is murdered by David's general Joab, breaking David's heart. The fallout doesn't end with David's repentance. It's not “truth *or* consequences” but “truth *and* consequences.”

That's why evil is never a private thing. It always involves other people, always impacts other individuals and whole societies. Like a pebble thrown into a pond, even after the surface

returns to a mirror-like smoothness at the point of impact, the ripples keep spreading away in ever-widening circles until they crash together on the shoreline. If we sow the wind, we should not be surprised when we reap the whirlwind.

Then does the truth really set us free after all? What kind of freedom is it, if we still have to live with the consequences of our evil actions, even when we've 'fessed up' and repented? Seems like the bad news is really bad.

Well, it may be bad, but the good news is better. Because we live in a world that has truth and justice as its foundations, because we are the creatures of a holy God, the bad news can never have the final word. For ultimately, the bad news, the worst consequences of our worst behavior, are redeemable— in fact, have been redeemed, our faith insists, though it may take us our whole lifetime or all of human history to live into that reality.

Telling the truth, both about our individual sins and our collective sins, sets free the power of God to begin to absorb the destructiveness of evil, and turn it back on itself. And that is precisely why we Christians can sing "In the cross of Christ I glory," or to affirm the truth of the old Latin motto, "*Crux est mundi medicina*," "The cross is the medicine for the world." And so it is. For there, particularly, we see evil and its consequences laid bare. It is not for that, however, that we glory in the cross, but because, there also, above all else, we see, if we have faith, God's willingness and power to absorb within God's own self the consequences of our evil and bring life out of the very jaws of death. It is the Easter experience of resurrection, of new life, of new beginnings, of fresh starts, that makes the cross only the story of human evil, but of God's relentless faithfulness love for the whole creation. And in such faithful love is the medicine for the ultimate healing of our hurts and the hurts of the whole world.