

Carol M. Strickland  
First Presbyterian Church of Athens  
July 5, 2020, Communion Sunday  
Texts: Psalm 51, 1 John 1:5-9

## Confession

### *Introduction to Scripture*

We are reading the Psalms this summer, those poignant poems in the heart of our Bibles. Today we come to Psalm 51. It is one of the penitential psalms, a designation given by the early church. *Penitential* means being sorry for wrongs you have committed. Before verse 1, the text begins with an editorial comment (a superscription) about its authorship and context. Listen now for God's word. *Psalm 51*.

### *Sermon*

Before we can attend to Psalm 51, it behooves us to attend to the story the scripture links to it. That story from 2 Samuel contains some adult themes. I will be as delicate as possible, but must warn you that it is R-rated for sex and violence.

The biblical narrator of 2 Samuel begins the tale by telling us that in the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent his general and soldiers off to war with the Amorites, but returned to Jerusalem. Those were the days when kings fought alongside their troops. So, leaving them, for no good reason, hints at a leader whose leadership is, well, lacking.

At home in his palace idling while his men battled, King David, late one afternoon rose from his couch and went up to the rooftop. Striding beside the parapet, he had a commanding view. It included a beautiful woman who was bathing. It was the Jewish custom that women purify themselves on the eighth day after their monthly cycle. Indeed, the narrator tells us this was the case with Bathsheba. Since the Jewish day begins at sunset and homes typically did not have bathtubs, it would not be unusual for a woman to do her bathing at sunset on the roof where rainwater was collected. I imagine that modest men did not ogle from high places at that hour.

The king sent a servant to inquire about the woman, then, when he learned that her husband Uriah was one of his soldiers off fighting one of his battles, the king sent messengers to fetch her. She came, and then he lay with her. The narrator tells of no conversation between the two, no seduction by one or the other, nothing but the quick succession of actions: he sent, she came, he lay. There is no question of who had the power in the relationship, of who had his way, of who never questioned that his lust be sated. He did simply because he could.

Bathsheba returned home, but a couple of weeks later it was her turn to send. The message she sent said simply, "I'm pregnant." Now what began as a royal entertainment, a royal entitlement, became a royal inconvenience, but easily fixed, assumed David. So, in a clever

scheme to cover his tracks, David sent word to his general to send Uriah home on the pretense of reporting to the king on the war effort. After hearing Uriah's account of military affairs, the king urged Uriah to go home and spend the night with his wife. That way the paternity of the child in utero would never be questioned. But quite contrary to David's assumptions about how things would go, Uriah would have none of it. He would not enjoy the comforts of his own bed and wife in it while his comrades were camping in tents. He slept instead at the door to the palace with the king's servants. David commanded him to stay in town two more days, hoping he would go home, and even got him drunk, but Uriah would not go home to his wife.

So, by David's increasingly blind reasoning, the husband must be eliminated. Perhaps the fact that said husband happened to be a Hittite, an ethnic minority, made him more easily expendable. So, the king sent Uriah back to the battlefield carrying his own death warrant. It was a sealed letter to the general commanding the general to send Uriah to the front lines where surely he would be killed. And he was. Problem solved!

But, not so fast! The narrator tells us that the thing that David had done displeased the Lord. While the divine right of kings to rule with impunity may have prevailed in other kingdoms, David was, after all, a Jew. Even he was beholden to God's law. So, the Lord sent the prophet Nathan to his royal highness.

How would you, if you were Nathan, tell the king that his naked abuse of power and privilege was wrong? How would you point out David's arrogant treatment of those entrusted to his care—fellow human beings, made in the image of God same as he, treated like so many chess pieces, which he took as he wished, and did as he pleased—all without consequence? How would you speak truth to power?

Nathan told he king a story.

“There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks; but the poor man had nothing but one little lamb, which he had bought. It used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, play with his children, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock to serve his guest but instead took he poor man's lamb.”

Upon hearing this, David exploded in anger. “As surely as God lives,” he said to Nathan, “that man deserves death. He must pay for the lamb four times over because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.”

To which Nathan replied, “You are the man.”

Nathan went on to deliver the news that the cycle of violence that David had begun would not end. The ripples would keep rippling. As David had taken Uriah's wife and had him killed by the sword of the Amorites, the sword would never depart from David's royal house. His wives would be taken and given to his neighbor. The child of his and Bathsheba's union would die.

Cut to the quick, the once-swaggering king admitted, “I have sinned against the Lord.”

Did he retire to his chamber and pen the prayer of contrition we know as Psalm 51 that day? Or was it later after the child was born and became very ill for seven days and David fasted, and pled with God, and lay all night on the ground beside the crib until it died? Or was Psalm 51 authored much later by someone else and attributed to David as the appropriate response of one who abuses power? We will never know. But the about-face is certain. And the irony is sharp.

The one who had shown no pity prays, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love.”

The one who had taken a woman from her faithful bathing and had his way prays, “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity.”

The one who had sent an innocent man to die prays, “Deliver me from bloodshed.”

While David’s sin was against others, all sin is ultimately against God. “Against you, you alone, have I sinned.” Sin is a violation of our relationship with God. That doesn’t mean that our sin doesn’t hurt others or that we should not make things right with them. But it does mean that our twisted lives must finally deal with God. We cannot imagine that we are autonomous beings who can live lives without reference to God and God’s commandments.

We may object, saying that adultery, rape, and murder are not be on our rap sheet, but we deceive ourselves if we think we are righteous. Our sin runs deep in our bones. “Indeed, I was born guilty,” the psalmist says. This may be hyperbole, but it captures how intractable is our propensity to miss the mark. We come to God empty handed. Only God can right the relationship, can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Only God can hit the delete button to clear our screen and make new life possible for our disordered selves.

The most poignant part of this prayer comes at the end when the psalmist says, “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” Arrogance has left the building and humility stands in its place.

Humility is considered weakness by many. But it takes great strength to be humble. It takes great courage to be honest, especially about your blind spots. It is a brave thing to let go of pride that causes you to rationalize all sorts of wrongdoing. It is not weak to examine your unwitting assumptions about the way things are and to look boldly at the truth, to admit that you are not always right.

During these days of Quarantide and racial division and social unrest, we are being asked to examine our souls as individuals, as members of a society, as a nation. We have just celebrated Independence Day, and there is so much good to celebrate about our country. But we must also ask, Where is our sin? Whom have we hurt? What is the right thing to do? These are questions not only of the heart but of pocketbooks and public policy. These are hard questions and deserve honest answers. “You desire truth in the inward being,” says the psalmist to God, “therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart.”

Had it not been for Nathan, holding up a mirror to the king, I wonder if David ever would have seen his blinders, much less removed them. Thank Goodness for the Nathans of the world. They, too, are very courageous.

David is remembered as a being a man after God's own heart. Interesting that David's heart gets broken and his spirit gets crushed because I think that's what God's heart is like: broken. Every sin we commit breaks it again. Every arrogant posture we assume, every person we treat like a thing, every selfish desire we sate at another's expense, both as individuals and as a culture, cracks the divine heart open again. But that's the price of love. Vulnerability is the price of love.

We meet that love at the Table spread before us. We meet it in broken bread and poured wine, in Jesus' sacrifice of body and blood for us. Come to this sacrament in humility. Come in honesty. Come with a heart broken open. And leave with the gift of your life given back clean, restored, delivered that you may embody love to a broken world.