

“Being Forgiven and Letting Go”

Rev. Dr. Bill Ekhardt

I have been here for almost a year and, because of that, it's about time for me to receive a performance review. Bret [Voorhees] shared that with me as he talked with me about being nominated for the position [of Associate Pastor, Chief of Staff]. Performance reviews are not one of those things that we put on the top ten lists of things we are looking forward to. [Laughter] I don't mind it. I'm looking forward to sharing the time with him, but we don't invite the opportunity to be held accountable. It's not something we seek out in our lives. In fact, it's much easier to try to avoid accountability. We don't enjoy opportunities for those in our house to tell us what we forgot to get done. We don't look forward to opportunities to have those hard conversations, where people will hold us to account for the things we said we would do, but we failed to do.

In King David's position it was even more difficult. He was in a position of power, and you have seen throughout the news this last year in the “Me Too” movement, in particular, that those in positions of power were able to go for years at a time without being held to account; without their behavior, their negative actions to others underneath them, from being stopped. The bad behaviors continued and there was nothing to stop them.

Something similar was happening here in David's court. David was the king of Israel and, you know, when I grew up David was the only king of Israel I ever paid attention to, so I assumed that all of the kings of Israel were pretty good kings. That they followed God, loved God, sought to serve God as a steward of the kingdom that God had brought them - but that's not so much the truth. The fact is that most of the kings of Israel treated God a little bit like the Lannisters treated the temple in Game of Thrones. It was a place that they could use for power, or a shoo aside, or set aside, if it was for the benefit.

Just two generations after David, we see this happening in the life of Jeroboam, for example. In 2 Kings 14, Jeroboam (for those of you who are not history nerds of the Old Testament, Jeroboam was the first king of the divided kingdom.) So David's son, Solomon, became king of all of Israel and, then, Solomon's son, Rehoboam, was a jerk. The people gathered to follow him as king and he asked his advisors how to rule. They said, “Go and make peace with the Elders. Treat them kindly and they will follow you.” And he set them aside and said, “I would rather listen to these kids I grew up with.”

So he consulted with the kids he grew up with, and they said, “You know what? You have just got to teach them a lesson. You've got to be hard on them and they will obey you.” And so, he said, “I'm going to increase your giving to me. I'm going to make everything harder on you,” and sadly 10 tribes left the kingdom; and, Jeroboam was the one who led that part of the kingdom out of Israel.

So, Jeroboam was appointed by the Prophet Ahijah. One day he came to him and said, “God recognizes that you are going to lead this part of the tribe out of the kingdom of Israel. We are going to keep David and his family on the throne in Jerusalem;” so he understood that he was being given this by God - but Jeroboam did not follow God, did not understand himself to be holding the kingdom on behalf of God.

Instead he was concerned. People worshiped in Jerusalem, and they worshiped the God of Abraham and Sarah. They worship Yahweh. What if people wanted to keep following that God and that drew the tribal elders back to the kingdom of the north? So he created two golden calves. Does that sound familiar? He created new gods, and he recruited new priests, and he turned his part of the kingdom away from the God who led them.

So Ahijah, who had told him he would be king, came to speak to him. This is how it happened: His wife was concerned and so he said, "What I want you to do is, go pretend to be a beggar and go talk to this prophet who told me I'd be king,"

So, she dressed up like a beggar and brought some beggar's gifts to go see the Prophet Ahijah. But, when Ahijah heard the sound of her coming he said, "Come in, wife of Jeroboam. Why this pretense?"

"I have been sent to you with bad news. Go, tell Jeroboam that this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'I raised you up from among the people, and I made you a leader over my people of Israel. I tore the Kingdom away from the house of David, and gave it to you; but you have not been like my servant, David, who kept my commands and followed me with all my heart, doing only what was right in my eyes. You have done more evil than all who lived before you. You have made for yourself other gods - idols made of metal. You have provoked me to anger and thrust me behind your back. Because of this, I am going to bring disaster on the house of Jeroboam.'"

Now, there is just one little line that I would like to draw attention to in that passage. We just read earlier in the sermon text, the story of Nathan rebuking David - rebuking him for murdering someone. But then, four years or so later, God spoke through the Prophet Ahijah and said, "You have not been like my servant David, who kept my commandments and followed me with all his heart, to do only what was right in my eyes."

What is God up to? Let's go back and remember this story of David. David was someone who devoutly followed God and who loved God - who sought God's providence. But, David failed. David was in a position of power and somehow - in the midst of the Temple court around him - he had people who he could call, and bring a woman to him who he saw, and was attracted to, and they kept it quiet. They were the confidants who would not bring any news to account. So, he did. He called this woman, who he was attracted to, to him and had an affair, and she became pregnant, and he tried to cover it up.

He called her husband back from battle. He had sent his armies off to battle and he brought him back, because he wanted to make it not obvious that the woman had had an affair with someone else, but the soldier was too devout. He wouldn't go home. He brought him back and he got him drunk, and he brought him to the royal chamber in the throne room and they had this great feast. But the soldier said, "I'm not going to go home and enjoy my family when my brothers-in-arms are in battle. I will stay here with the servants." So - frustrated - David penned a letter and gave it to Uriah, the Hittites' commander, and said, "Send Uriah, the Hittite, up to the front of the battle, where you know the fighting will be fierce, and then withdraw, so that he might be killed."

Apparently, David had gotten away with this. There was a commander who knew about it - and no one else. But God was displeased. God did not leave David in this sin. God did not

desire this predicament. What would have happened if David's character was never confronted? What would have happened to the Kingdom, if this eventually was allowed to become a natural part of what happened? That the King just killed people at random to cover up for his own failings.

But God brought Nathan to David and confronted him. It's difficult to speak truth to power. It is not easy to go to someone who has the ability to hurt your life and David had already demonstrated that he had the willingness to kill somebody. It is hard to go to them and say, "You screwed up." But that is what God asked this prophet to do.

So, what did he do? You see this pattern a few times throughout Scripture. A prophet goes and tells the story about something else, to try to help the king understand without directly accusing him. The Prophet Nathan told this story to David, about a rich man who had great flocks. But this one poor family beside him had a man who had a little baby lamb, who loved that lamb and raised it like a pet. It ate in his household. It played with them and their children like a dog. And the rich man, when a traveler came to him, he wouldn't take one of his own flock to make a feast for his friend. So he took this lamb, and served it. He used his power to press his neighbor.

David burned with anger. He said, "This is not right. I cannot have a Kingdom where people treat people this way. He must repay for this four-times over." And, Nathan told him, "You are the man."

I don't know what it was like for David to be confronted and I don't know if David had an idea that anyone would ever know, but we can appreciate the example that David gave here. He did not dispute it or deny that he had done anything wrong. Instead he hung his head in sorrow and said, "I have sinned against them."

The passage we read has just a brief little statement. It just says, "I have sinned against the Lord." You may already know the passage that Chris read this morning, from Psalm 51, is attributed to this moment in David's life. The attribution at the top says, "The Song of David when the Prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba," and this was David's prayer. This is how he responded when Nathan confronted him: *"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my great transgressions. Wash away all of my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. For I was sinful from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Surely you desire truth in their inner hearts, and you teach me wisdom in most ways. Cleanse me with hyssop and I will be clean; wash me and I will be whiter than snow. Create in me a pure heart, O God. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all of my iniquities."*

It is a beautiful prayer. It is a prayer that acknowledges that he failed. Confronted by God, David said "I failed; forgive me, for I have sinned." And perhaps what is most striking to me is his request that God would blot out his sins – "hide your face from my iniquity" – because that is what God did.

Two generations later when God spoke of David, the one whom he had rebuked through Nathan for taking another man's wife and committing murder to cover it up, he said of David, "You were not like my servant David, who kept my commands with all my heart doing only what was right in my eyes."

This is the God who came to David, and this is the God who invites us to forgiveness. It's the God who doesn't leave us in our sin. We might not want the performance review. We might not want to face the ways we have failed. In fact, looking back in my own life, I think I can see a number of ways I gladly didn't face it, but just kept living in the brokenness of it. I knew that I hadn't asked for forgiveness, or reconciled with someone, but rather than face that hard conversation, I was ready to just live in the fallout and brokenness of it.

But God, like the Good Shepherd, went out and found David - David the lost lamb - and he picked him up and wrapped him in his loving arms and he forgave him. We have a God who not only desires that we confess and repent, but a God who longs for us to be cleansed and renewed; restored from our brokenness of our lives but renewed in the love and grace from the One who is ready to blot out everything we have done wrong. David had the opportunity to stand before God as the King, as a child of God knowing that God had forgiven him for everything he had done. And, God offers that same forgiveness to each of us; a forgiveness that blots out all our iniquity, a forgiveness that allows us to know we stand before God completely refreshed, renewed and blameless. Amen.