

Stealing the Lamb

2 Samuel 12:1b-7a NRS . . . the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. ² The rich man had very many flocks and herds; ³ but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. ⁴ Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him." ⁵ Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; ⁶ he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity." ⁷ Nathan said to David, "You are the man!"

Luke 6:31-34 NRS ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you. ³² "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again.

Stealing the Lamb

I thought we were through talking about David for the time being - until I realized how rich and how timely today's passage is. The prophet Nathan appears three times in the stories of King David. Each time he demands a change in David's plans. Kings are usually surrounded by people eager to agree with and obey everything that the king says. But the prophet Nathan is no yes man. When David wanted to build a temple for God, Nathan delivered the news that David was to leave that task for his son to do. (2 Samuel 7) When David was up in years and it appeared that his son Adonijah would inherit the throne, Nathan showed up to tell David that Solomon was to be the next king. (1 Kings 1-2) In today's reading, David had just married Bathsheba and he thought that whole situation had been settled. Then Nathan showed up, and began to tell a story.

A poor man had very little except for a little female lamb that he raised and that became like one of his own children. He had almost nothing, but this pet that he loved very much. A rich man in the same town had a guest arrive. He wanted to show generous hospitality to his guest, but was too stingy to provide meat from his own very large flocks. So he stole the poor man's pet, slaughtered it, and served it for dinner. The guest thought he was enjoying hospitality the rich man had dressed up in justice as graciousness. It's a story that reeks with greed, selfishness, theft, brutality, and cynical disregard for a poor neighbor.

As king, David was used to having events placed before him and rendering judgment on the people involved. This story is disgusting and David was revolted when he heard the story. He cut to the heart of the matter, declaring that the man had no pity¹, no compassion for the circumstances and happiness of his poor neighbor.

Then the prophet Nathan thundered God's message, "You are the man!" You have to admire Nathan. It's dangerous to speak the hard truth to powerful people. Shooting the messenger is a common expression because those who tell the truth that people don't want to hear are frequently fired, ostracized, and yes, even killed. Even today, with protective laws, whistle blowers often don't fare well.

We should note a few things about how David responded to this damning accusation by Nathan. David didn't have the palace guards arrest Nathan. He didn't have Nathan tossed out on his ear. David didn't stonewall or deny what he had done. David didn't try to reframe what he had done to Bathsheba and her husband Uriah by putting political spin on the whole affair. David took the condemnation from Nathan without protest. When Nathan finished, David understood that in sinning against his fellow man, he had also sinned against the One who had created all people and who expected them to live in

love. Many centuries later, John made this clear when he wrote, ²⁰ Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. (1John 4:20 NRS) David understood this and confessed, "I have sinned against the Lord." David recognized the real nature of sin – rebellion against God, disregard for God, and separation from God.

Even though David had declared that the rich man who stole the lamb deserved to die, Nathan told David that he wouldn't be punished with death. In fact, feeling guilty doesn't seem to be the goal. Guilt is about the past and the past can't be changed. David – and us as well- is called to repentance. It isn't just a matter of saying that we're sorry – but of turning our lives around and going in a new direction. This doesn't mean that David - or we - is free from the natural consequences of his actions. Cruel actions are not cancelled out with a few religious platitudes. Just like a stone dropped in a pond creates ripples without a visible end. Sin creates ripples in life that affect people all around us. Sin rips the fabric of God's creation, making tears that are hard to mend. In the years that followed, David suffered as he watched his sons live out the same disregard for family bonds that he himself had displayed in his sordid treatment of Bathsheba and her husband. One son raped his sister. One son raped his father's concubines. Two sons tried to take the throne from their father. The seeds that David sowed bore evil and painful fruit.

We cheat ourselves if we dismiss this simple little story about the poor man and his pet ewe. In God's view, the powerless are as valuable as the powerful. Exploitation of those who are powerless is evil, pure and simple. The point of the story seems so obvious. Why does David have to be told that the story is about him? Here's the question that never occurs to us. Why do we think the story isn't about us?

About us? How can that be? I doubt seriously that there's anyone here this morning that has had a husband killed to cover up an affair with the man's wife. But the story about the little pet lamb isn't that narrow. It's about how we see - or don't see - the value of someone else. "We've got to consider everyone in our presence as being fully human. If we start to dehumanize the other, the person that's around us that's not really like us, then the opportunity for abuse really rises."²

As we read this story about King David and how God sent the prophet Nathan to tell David a little simple story, it's easy for us to be as indignant about David - as David was about the rich man that stole the lamb. It's easy to spot injustice in situations that don't involve our security, our position in society, or our selfish desires. But, at the same time we're often involved in injustice that's caused by our narrow focus on our family, our wants, our nation, or our self-esteem. We have to ask ourselves, figuratively speaking, how are we "stealing the lamb?"

It is so hard to realize how we are stealing the lamb. But we, you and me, we probably do it every day. When we enjoy a wonderful meal in a nice restaurant, but can't seem to find money or time to put food in the red wagon out in the hallway, we're stealing the lamb. When we reap the benefits of our own education - but watch passively as public schools struggle to pay teachers and maintain aging facilities, we're stealing the lamb from families that can't afford private schools. When we drive past a local merchant to shop at a national chain, we're stealing the lamb from our neighbor - for the small difference in pricing. When we gladly accept any government program that benefits us in some way, but resist any program that would benefit others less fortunate than ourselves, we're stealing the lamb. Anytime we celebrate what we have - with no thought or compassion for the neighbor who has not - we risk stealing the lamb.

We tend to be blind to how our actions might affect others. We have more practice in making decisions based on saving time and saving money - than we do on saving pain and suffering on the part of others. The point in all of this isn't to dump some kind of guilt trip on each other. Rather than feel guilty, we can move toward the joyful possibilities.

Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, offered this wisdom in a recent sermon.

“Moralists (archbishops included) can thunder away as much as they like; but they’ll make no difference unless and until people see that there is something transforming and exhilarating about the prospect of a whole community rejoicing together – being glad of each other’s happiness and safety. This alone is what will save us from the traps of ludicrous financial greed, of environmental recklessness, of collective fear of strangers and collective contempt for the unsuccessful and marginal . . .”³ The good archbishop reminds us that when we refrain from stealing the lamb . . . everybody wins. The whole community is transformed when we seek each other's good, when we think in terms of compassion more than gain, when the circumstance of others isn't blocked from our view by our own shortsightedness. The peaceable kingdom is built by being peaceable with one another. It is in loving that we are loved. It is in giving that we receive. We would all be so much happier if we were more aware of how we can avoid stealing the lamb. Amen.

¹ It’s the same word used as when Pharaoh’s daughter rescues the baby Moses and when Moses intercedes on behalf of the Hebrews when they worshipped the golden calf.

² Todd Drake, artist, interview broadcast on WFDD-FM, *Triad Arts Up Close* on August 8, 2012

³ Archbishop Rowan Williams, sermon on the occasion of Queen Elizabeth’s diamond jubilee