

Remember Who You Are By Holly Aastuen
August 2, 2009 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a

A couple weeks ago, on a Tuesday morning, Serena walked into the office at 9:30 to begin her work for the day as office administrator. I had heard her earlier, playing the piano in the sanctuary for as some of you know, Serena is both our music director and our office administrator.

When she walked into the office, I greeted her with the lament, "You know, I hardly ever see the music director around here anymore." And Serena smartly replied, "Well, she was here just a minute ago."

It's a good thing that Serena remembers who she is, depending on where she is and what she is doing at the time. As someone who juggles two very different positions, I imagine it helps her to keep her sanity to remember who she is at any given time.

We just read from the Bible a story of a man who had trouble remembering who he was. King David was someone that lived life much as he wanted and, especially in today's story, forgot his responsibilities to others around him. He was a King, whose country was at war, but rather than being where he was supposed to be, namely at the battlefield, leading his army and inspiring his troops, he was at home, and idle. As he was taking a stroll on his roof he let his emotions run away with him and, conveniently forgetting that Bathsheba was already married, related to her in a way that only married couples do.

He forgot the reason he was king at all was because his predecessor, King Saul, disobeyed God and was removed from his office because of his disobedience. David forgot who he was and whose he was and who had put him there in the first place, and in the process of following his own desires and whims he betrayed those who had put their trust in him.

St. Bernard of Clairvaux, a French abbot from the 11th century wrote a meditation On Loving God in which he outlines his view of the progress of love. He outlines four stages.

The first stage is loving ourselves for ourselves. This is an immature, self-centered kind of love, which is necessary for us to survive early in life. We need to look out for ourselves and love ourselves first.

The second comes when we realize we cannot exist by ourselves and we realize through faith that we must love God as we love ourselves. This is a love of God not for God's sake, but for selfish reasons.

The third degree, as Bernard calls it, is when we learn to worship God, when by meditation, study and prayer we find that God is altogether lovely and delightful. When we have tasted and seen how gracious God is, we love God for God's own sake, not merely as someone who benefits us, but as someone worthy of praise.

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At this point Bernard stops and says that the final stage of love—love of self for God's sake is something that he is unable to achieve. He expects to reach that goal when he enters into the joy of his God, when he will forget himself and grow to become wholly God's. At that time Bernard believes he will be joined to God and be one in spirit with God.

This process of loving God as outlined by Bernard of Clairvaux, moves us from a cringing fear of God, such as a slave's attitude toward a master out of fear of punishment, to a hopeful obedience to God out of expectation of reward, to the disciplined obedience of a student to a teacher and finally to the respectful obedience of a son who knows he is an heir.

The problem for King David is that he has cycled back in his life to the more selfish stages of loving and is caught in a cycle of loving himself more than he loves others.

He forgets that a King is often called upon to put others before himself and his own selfish desires.

In this story of King David, the one who reminds him of what he has forgotten is Nathan, the prophet. Nathan tells a clever story about a rich man who wanted a lamb to feed to a traveling guest and instead of taking one from his many flocks and herds, he takes the poor man's one and only much beloved lamb and kills it for the guest.

David was taken in by the story and said, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die." Then Nathan delivers the final blow, "You are the man."

Then Nathan continues: "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in God's sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites."

Nathan doesn't tell David anything he doesn't know, he simply tells the truth and holds a mirror, as it were, up to David's face and David finally fully realizes what he has done and collapses in repentance.

There are times in our lives when we act with the highest ideals. We praise God with no selfish motives, we serve others with no thought of reward, we seek to live a godly life in order to please God.

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But all of us are tempted by lesser things. We are tempted to stray after things that bring us no satisfaction, to seek something other than God to satisfy the longing of our hearts.

Just like King David, we are easily led astray.

I'm told that some parents use the words of this sermon's title when their son or daughter is going out on a date: Remember who you are. I'm told that it's an admonition sort of like, "Don't do anything I wouldn't do," a last minute piece of advice to help people to remember to be true to themselves and not stray too far from their ideals, even if they are tempted to act more selfishly.

Life would be easier if Bernard of Clairvaux's stages of love weren't linear, if we could go through those selfish stages early in life and be done with them. Unfortunately, that's not the case and for one reason or another even when we are at the stage where we love God for God's sake, we revert back to the first stage of love of self for selfish reasons. That's what happened to King David. Even though his love of God had been apparent throughout his reign and he strove to live a godly life, when faced with temptation, he quickly became interested in his own welfare above all else.

If someone as good and decent as King David, can give in to evil then who are we to stand up against it?

The good news is that we are not alone. When faced with temptations, God will give us strength if we ask for it. And even if we fail to ask for that help and we do give in to temptation, God forgives us when we repent.

As it says in Psalm 51, written by King David after Nathan confronted him, "the sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

In the end what we really want as Christians is a right relationship with God. We want to remember who we are—a carpenter's son, a king's daughter, a child of God. We want to remember in our hearts who and whose we are, to re-connect our actions with our convictions and become what God calls us to be.

It is only when we are being true to ourselves and who we were created to be that we will find our true peace.

I heard someone talking about this on, of all places, Car Talk, a weekly public radio show where two very jovial brothers from Boston have a talk show where people can call in with their problems or concerns about their cars. As often happens, someone called with a car problem that turned out to be more about her marriage than her car and wondering if she should tell her partner the truth about the dent in her back fender, how she accidentally backed her car into

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another car in the parking lot. As they discussed the dent on Car Talk and how she could avoid telling her spouse about the incident, they progressed to a point where she had to tell a lie to cover up about the previous lie and the deception got more and more complicated. In order to maintain her innocence, she had to take several steps to keep her partner in the dark.

Finally the hosts of Car Talk said to her, "You know you're going to have to tell him the truth, don't you? There's no way you can keep up the lying forever."

We can't keep lying forever. We can't keep following our selfish desires and expect God to never find out.

We can only hope that there are some Nathans in our lives who, like the prophet in King David's life, are willing to shake us out of our self-deception and bring us back to a right relationship with ourselves and with our God.

Remember who you are. This is good advice not only for when we're going on a date, but for all of our lives. Too often we forget. Remember who you are.

Amen.