

The Sting of Self-Deception

2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a; Psalm 51

Whitefish UMC

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- † It wasn't long for the airwaves. The television show "Kings" tanked after only thirteen episodes. How interesting that its debut show received a trouncing in the ratings by none other than "Desperate Housewives."
- † It wasn't until a young pastor friend told me of his addiction to the doomed series that I realized that it was a contemporary retelling of the biblical story of King David. Set in the fictional Kingdom of Gilboa, which technologically and culturally resembles the present-day United States, "Kings" told a soaped-up version of the all-too-human tale we heard in this morning's scripture reading.
- † Why did the series fail to garner adequate ratings to be renewed for another season? Although critically acclaimed and with a stellar cast, "Kings" creator Michael Green suggested that NBC failed to market it adequately.
- † Apparently the network feared overt marketing to Christian audiences, afraid that the contemporary reality might be offensive. Marketers wouldn't even use the term "King David," fearful that they couldn't risk being too overtly religious either. And so the show failed to find a significant enough audience.
- † Odd, isn't it? The story of King David has a decidedly contemporary feel to it, doesn't it? David, in scripture, is a complex and ambiguous figure. One commentator says that David is the most rounded

- character in the bible, the one who is given the most flesh and character with whom we can relate.
- † And that is partly because David is deeply flawed. When we were children, we thought of David as the golden-haired underdog who slew Goliath and played the harp like an angel. As we grew older, we were taught that he was the writer of the psalms—an impressive accomplishment to be sure.
 - † But if we bothered to read his entire story in the Hebrew Bible, we learned that David was also a warlord, a terrorist, and a traitor. When he becomes king after Saul, he rules as a kind of despot and of course commits adultery with Bathsheba, an event that forms one of the hinges of whole history of Israel.
 - † What does it mean for a nation to put its trust into a deeply flawed human king for whom power and privilege trump faithfulness to God? The people of Israel soon found out.
 - † David's armies were at war, but David was at home in his Jerusalem palace when he saw a beautiful woman taking her bath on the roof of a nearby building. He told her to come over and had sex with her and she got pregnant. It's a story as old as the hills and as contemporary as the headlines.
 - † And as so often happens, the story becomes even more complicated and interwoven as David attempts a cover-up. Bathsheba is married to one of his soldiers, Uriah the Hittite, so he calls him back from the front and suggests that he spend the night with his wife so he will think the baby is his.

- † But Uriah is more noble than that and declines the comforts of home while his soldier comrades are suffering the hardships of the battlefield. By his nobility, he thwarts David's plan of deception.
- † But David is not to be denied his plans, and now he's dug himself a too-deep trench of lies. So he sends Uriah back to the front with a secret letter directing his commander, Joab, to put Uriah in the front lines so he will be sure to be killed by the enemy. Joab becomes a co-conspirator, and Uriah is killed under orders from David.
- † After an appropriate mourning period, David and Bathsheba marry and she bears him a son. It seems that the conspiracy has worked until the prophet Nathan appears on the scene. God is not pleased and the prophet Nathan is sent to speak truth to power.
- † Nathan doesn't confront David directly, though. He is a wise prophet. So he tells a story, a story with a sting in the tale. A funny story, almost childish, about a rich man who has plenty of flocks and herds and a poor man who only has one little ewe lamb, which he treats like a family member.
- † But the nasty rich man doesn't kill one of his many animals to feed a visitor—he steals the lamb and kills it—the beloved pet of the poor man. Upon hearing the story, David has deceived himself so much that he doesn't recognize himself in the tale.
- † Bursting with rage, he rains judgment down on the rich man, not realizing he is calling judgment upon himself. But then Nathan turns to him and says, "You are the man!" And the whole room held its collective breath, I imagine.
- † And David is forced to confront the worst deception of all—the tangled web of lies he has told himself to justify his actions.

- † Now why spend time on this story today—other than because it’s a juicy tidbit of human frailty that sounds a lot like the story of our contemporary politicians—some of them at least.
- † Because all of us exhibit an amazing ability to avoid the truth about who we are and what we do. All of us are, have been, or could be self-deceivers—maybe not of David’s proportions—but self-delusional nonetheless. We are prone to it, capable of it, and never more likely to be in its grip than when we are sure we are not.
- † Doesn’t God call us to be honest in our dealings with God, with others, and ourselves? Self-deception can disrupt all of those relationships. Self-deception occurs when people who are committed to certain values act against those values while convincing themselves that what they are doing does not in fact violate those values.
- † And lest you think that the biblical model of self-deception appears only in the Old Testament, think of the disciple Peter, the rock upon whom Christ built his church. He told himself and others that he would never desert his master. He wanted to be that person.
- † But he valued self-preservation more. Until his moment of truth when he faced the fact that he not only couldn’t live up to his ideal of faithfulness but didn’t want to, he was self-deceived.
- † Haven’t you detected instances of self-deception when people interpret to us the meaning of their behavior in ways that seem far-fetched or skewed? Do you read “Dear Abby” in the newspaper?
- † Self-deception lurks in denials, rationalizations, cover-ups, elaborate and almost convincing justifications, excuses, attributions of blame and evasions of responsibility.

- † Think of the person with an eating disorder who denies any problem; the alcoholic who lies about his drinking; the abuser who blames their victim. I know, you think—these are extreme examples, right?
- † Samuel Johnson once noted the kinds of moves self-deceivers make: they congratulate themselves on a single act of generosity, telling themselves that they are generous people; or they dwell on the faults of others; or they avoid people who know what they are like, preferring the company of those who will not expose them to themselves.
- † Self-deceivers, Johnson said, avoid “self-communion.” If the loss of honesty undermines communal life, the loss of self-honesty undermines the inner life—after awhile one cannot trust oneself.
- † One of the most important books I have ever read is entitled *Leadership and Self-Deception* by the Arbing Institute. Although it’s geared for business leaders, a group of pastors studied it in our leadership incubator.
- † You may not believe it, but pastors fall prey to self-deception, too. They blame their parishioners instead of their preaching when the parishioners doze off on Sundays. They put certain people in a proverbial box, deciding that they are unreachable or not worthy of attention.
- † And lest you get too excited about applying self-deception tendencies only to your pastor, how about taking a moment to think about how you deceive yourself. Do you put people in a box, relegating them to the attic of your attention? Do you blame others for your shortcomings?

- † If you answer yes to these difficult questions, how will you allow yourself to feel the sting of self-deception? Who will be your Nathan? What psalm of confession will you write to God? And then what?
- † In case you haven't figured it out, the Psalm, number 51, that we read together responsively this morning is attributed to King David, after he accepts his guilt and self-deception and offers himself to God for transformation.
- † You may recognize parts of the psalm because some of its words appear on the purple and grey banner that graces our sanctuary all during Lent. Psalm 51 is traditionally read on Ash Wednesday, but it's important not to put it on the shelf until then.
- † No one wants to beat themselves up—let's face it. There are plenty of people who are willing to do that for us, right? But have we lost something in not taking time for self-reflection and confession? I think so.
- † Story of Greek Orthodox guy on phone.
- † So yes, a little more honest self-reflection helps us avoid deceiving ourselves. But the sad truth is that sometimes we are so deluded, in so much pain, so unhealthy, that we need a Nathan to confront us out of love.
- † Where are the friends of truth who will not allow us to enjoy our little illusions? Where are the Nathans who will speak to us, even at personal risk, about our failures to be honest with ourselves? Nathan was willing to risk his life in approaching David as he did. Maybe we don't want to do that, but what about people who will risk losing our friendship to lovingly confront us with the truth about ourselves?

- † As people of faith, we believe that before God there can be no illusion, no pretense, no lies. God, as Karth Barth once said, cannot be lied to. Our self-deception is, theologically speaking, an attempt to deceive God.
- † Whenever we believe that we are something we are not, whenever we convince ourselves that we have done all God requires, we settle for a comfortable self-image at the expense of that deeper self-communion in which the presence of God challenges us with a sting of truth.
- † Can we be loving friends with one another who open ourselves to honest self-reflection and more deeply to helping one another see ourselves more clearly?
- † The good news is that when we offer our imperfect selves to God, we can begin again, and again, and again to grow into the image of the God who created us for perfect love.
- † How? By taking the life of Jesus into us—as individuals and as a church, the body of Christ—so that we might be forgiven, healed, and blessed. But that’s not the end of it. We are called to offer that same forgiveness, healing, and blessing to each other and to the world—even to, no especially to those we blame, accuse, and ignore.
- † Is it possible? When we accept the bread of life as our source of power and love, it is. For we remember that on the night....Amen.

Sources:

Calum MacLeod, “The Sting in the Tale,” <http://fourthchurch.org>

Lloyd Steffen, “On Honesty and Self-Deception: ‘You Are the Man’”
<http://www.religiononline.org>