

LOVE MADE REAL

CALL TO WORSHIP (I Chronicles 16:23-31)

*Sing to the LORD, all the earth,
proclaim his victory day by day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous deeds to every people.
Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise;
he is more to be feared than all gods.
For the gods of the nations are idols every one;
but the LORD made the heavens.
Majesty and splendor attend him,
might and joy are in his dwelling.*

*Ascribe to the LORD, you families of nations,
ascribe to the LORD glory and might;
ascribe to the LORD the glory due to his name.
Bring an offering and come before him.
Worship the LORD in holy attire.
Tremble before him, all the earth.
He has established the earth immovably.
Let the heavens rejoice and the earth be glad;
Let it be declared among the nations,
“The LORD is king.”*

INVOCATION

O Fount of life, Fount of hope, and Fount of peace,

If we were to realize all the ways we are dependent upon you, how would our world change? If we were to notice every time we have been sustained by your creation and by your grace and presence, would we still slip into self-sufficiency? May we trust that whatever we earn or deserve, for good or for ill, pales in comparison to what you have lavished upon us through your Son Jesus Christ.

Amen.

SCRIPTURE (II Samuel 12:1-14)

The LORD sent Nathan the prophet to David, and when he entered the king's presence, he said, "In a certain town there lived two men, one rich, the other poor. The rich man had large flocks and herds; the poor man had nothing of his own except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He reared it, and it grew up in his home together with his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup, and nestled in his arms; it was like a daughter to him. One day a traveler came to the rich man's house, and he, too mean to take something from his own flock or herd to serve to his guest, took the poor man's lamb and served that up."

David was very angry, and burst out, "As the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He shall pay for the lamb four times over, because he has done this and shown no pity."

Nathan said to David, "You are the man! This is the word of the LORD the God of Israel to you: I anointed you king over Israel, I rescued you from the power of Saul, I gave you your master's daughter and his wives to be your own, I gave you the daughters of Israel and Judah; and, had this not been enough, I would have added other favours as well. Why then have you flouted the LORD's word by doing what is wrong in my eyes? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword; the man himself you murdered by the sword of the Ammonites, and you have stolen his wife.

"Now, therefore, since you have despised me and taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own wife, your family will never again have rest from the sword. This is the word of the LORD: I shall bring trouble on you from within your own family. I shall take your wives and give them to another man before your eyes, and he will lie with them in broad daylight. What you did was done in secret; but I shall do this in broad daylight for all Israel to see."

David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." Nathan answered, "The LORD has laid on another the consequences of your sin: you will not die, but, since by this deed you have shown your contempt for the LORD, the child who will be born to you shall die."

LOVE MADE REAL

About a month after I settled on this scripture passage for today, I attended a conference retreat on male spirituality in New Mexico with Kip. On Friday night, Richard Rohr, who has become a well-known speaker and Franciscan priest, gave a talk on the four major archetypes of the male psyche: the king, the warrior, the prophet, and the lover. Whereas Jesus integrated all four of these, by the end of his lifetime David probably integrated three out of the four archetypes. And Rohr mentioned this scene from Second Samuel as the primary occasion where David integrated the prophetic into his life.

He went on to say that David's interaction with the prophet Nathan is one of the few passages in the Bible, if not in all of Western literature, where a powerful king immediately admits that he is wrong. And in all likelihood, David admitted his wrongdoing not in private, but before all those who were in the king's presence when Nathan entered.

In contrast to Pharaoh, who only let God's people go after enough disaster had befallen him; in contrast to Jehoiakim, the king of Judah, who, instead of repenting, chose to destroy the scrolls of God's words as they came through the prophet Jeremiah; in contrast to the religious leaders of Israel who sought to kill God's Messiah rather than follow Him into true and lasting freedom – David, who was the most powerful king Israel ever had, revealed his true strength by immediately admitting that he was wrong. Confronted by Nathan with his sin, he admitted that he had sinned against the Lord without initial protest or denial of his own evil, which his predecessor Saul had done when the prophet Samuel confronted him with his own grievous act.

Despite his adulterous lust for Bathsheba and his murder of her husband Uriah, David displays here how deeply he received the Spirit and how truly free he was from something far worse than lust and violence: pride. I know people like myself who possess far less power and status than David who also possess far less humility.

One of the opposite virtues of pride is an eagerness to admit when we are wrong. One of the deeper forms my repentance can take is not simply "I'm sorry," but "I was wrong." If I am living the Christian life, if I am grounded in my conviction that I am not God, then the Holy Spirit will frequently lead me down the path of each of my false beliefs and assumptions until I reach the dead ends I did not see before.

Every major conversion I have had so far has required me to admit I was wrong about some fairly important directions my life was taking. Answering the leading of the Spirit to join the cross-country ski team required admitting that I was wrong about playing basketball and all the politics, popularity, and identity masks that came with it. Answering God's call to fall and stay in love first required me to face that something major was missing from my life. Answering God's call to the ministry required admitting that I was completely wrong about becoming a lawyer. And following Jesus to Fuller Theological Seminary required admitting that I was wrong about remaining at Wake Forest Divinity School.

But here's the thing about admitting when we are wrong. It is one of those occasions when God blesses us and draws near to us the most. It is like a narrow gate that, once we are through it, suddenly opens up into wide open space and possibility. It costs quite a bit to admit when we are wrong. But not nearly as much as it costs to continue in the same direction.

This is what David knew so well. And it is what our culture will never teach us. Our culture does not value confession and the drastic changes in life that might accompany it. Nor does it value admitting when we are wrong so we can be lead deeper into truth. It values consistency. American culture feels more comfortable and secure with leaders who do not change, but stay the same; who do not have very many hills and valleys in their development, only flat and steady terrain.

But a Christian should be the most inconsistent person in the world on the whole. If I become consistent in this sense, then I have become stagnant. I have stopped growing in some area of life. I cannot attain greater maturity without going through a period of immaturity. I cannot truly learn and make room in my life for something new without unlearning something else. Consistency often means I have arrived at a certain level of growth that I enjoy too much – whether it's in my belief systems or in my relationships – and I have decided to put my energy toward maintaining and remaining at this level rather than remaining on the path.

Non-Western languages tend to have more than one word for the same concept. Ancient Persian, for example, has 80 words for "love." I wish the English language had more nuanced words for "consistency" than it does because what I am talking about does not apply to certain

contexts. If I win at Scrabble five times in a row, that's a nice kind of consistency because I might learn new words or recall old ones each time. If without going through the motions I practice my spiritual disciplines with some degree of regularity, that's wonderful because there is room for differentiation within the pattern. But if I'm twenty-nine years old and most of my theology, beliefs, and opinions are still what they were when I was in Sunday School, then I have arrived at a harmful kind of consistency. It's the kind that reinforces myths that no longer serve the truth. It's the kind of consistency that believes people are not capable of real change.

David's response to Nathan's parable is fascinating. When Nathan tells him the story of a man who stole another man's most precious possession, David gets angry and judges that the man deserves death and should pay fourfold restitution. Yet when Nathan reveals God's judgment, David's life is spared and he remains king of Israel. God does not judge us nearly as harshly as we judge others. Oftentimes God's judgment of our behavior is far more merciful than our own judgment of other people, especially when we fail to recognize our own complicity.

God's judgment of our behavior is also far more restorative than our own. After committing certain sins, some people are inclined to mete out punishments to themselves that are more destructive than anyone else would have for them. When the main character in the film *Manchester by the Sea* stokes a winter fire in his house before walking to the grocery store, a log falls out onto the floor and burns down his house with his children inside. When he finds out that the police are not going to press any charges or place him in jail and they tell him it was an accident, he tries to kill himself with one of their guns.

Left to his own devices and his own judgment of himself, I am not sure what would have become of David if he had not first received the mercy and judgment of God. Before Nathan arrived, David was living in denial and ignorance of his sin. After Nathan spoke, David was living in self-condemnation. And before Nathan left, the mercy and judgment of God saved him from his own. Life, death, resurrection.

In every experience where we choose the fruits of death, God offers us the fruits of resurrected life for our healing. In our sin we are inclined to view the situation as evidence that we are not enough. After Nathan spoke, David probably felt like he was not good enough to live, certainly not good enough to remain king. But our sin is evidence of

nothing except the devil's envy of life. He only attacks the strong – those who have truly started to come alive. Our sin says nothing about our value before God. It says everything about our adversary's desire to destroy and twist everything God has made, including us.

How do we come to trust that we are enough for God? Look at the price Jesus was willing to pay to show us that every single person is so much more than a slave, that freedom is our inheritance from the Father, and that there is no bondage strong enough to bury love. Look at the life Jesus was willing to lead so that we could live lives full of what is impossible for the world to give. Look at the gift of the Holy Spirit Jesus was willing to give us so that we could have a relationship that no one but us can ever take away.

Every time you feel like you are not enough, every time you are overcome by verdicts of inadequacy, remember whose you are. Remember who died for you. Remember the value of God and that God in Christ has given Himself fully to you. What do you think God's giving of such a gift says about your worth to Him? What do you think your reception of such a gift does to your worth and value in the eyes of the One whose judgments are the only ones that really matter? It is an affirmation more real than anything you could convince yourself of.

If God did not think David was enough, if God did not think David was worth anything after he had sinned, He never would have sent Nathan to him. If God did not think Israel was enough, if God thought Israel was worth as much as Rome thought they were, He never would have sent Jesus. If God had given up on all the peoples at the ends of the earth, He never would have sent the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

We do not serve a God who gives up on people. We do not serve a God who is for us one day and against us another day. We serve a Redeemer. And that means there is something in us worth redeeming. We are not worthy of redemption, but we are worth redeeming. We do not deserve it, but we are worth it in God's eyes.

Every part of us – our bodies and souls, our hearts and spirits and the life breathed into us – is evidence that Christ believes we are worth everything. Satan would not put so much effort into our destruction if we were not valuable to God. You cannot destroy anything if nothing is there. You cannot devalue an absence of value. You cannot spiritually blind someone if there is not more than meets the eye.

Fully trusting that you are enough makes you hard to control. And it is because you are enough for God that you will never be enough for this world.

PRAYER AND LORD'S PRAYER

Holy Spirit, you are the Great Teacher. You offer to instruct us yourself in the ways and knowledge of God and in our callings for the rest of our lives. The more we learn directly from you, the more we must unlearn and admit where we have been wrong. Help us to trust that you can use everything for our good. Everything – even what we are wrong about. And help us trust that there's a reason why you do not give up on us, even when we give up on ourselves. And may you always teach us to pray, *“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.”*

BENEDICTION

May Christ the good shepherd
enfold you with love,
and the blessing of God almighty,
the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
be with you always. Amen.