

Date: Ordinary 15

**SUNDAY:** July 16

**SERMON: A Royal Power Trip**

Text(s): 2 Samuel 11:1-27; John 6:1-15

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Most of us whose children are grown up and out of the nest probably don't pay much as much attention to the ratings given to movies—whether they're rated G or PG or R—as we did when we were trying to decide whether or not our children should see a particular movie or not. We may believe in freedom of the press and freedom of speech, but we also believe in parental censorship.

The folks who create Sunday School curriculum materials practice parental censorship regularly on the Bible stories they select for children's consumption. So when kids study about King David in Sunday School, they get the stories where David comes off as a great hero—his brave fight as a teenager against a lion that is trying to attack his sheep, or the story that Mary focused on a few weeks ago—his fight with the giant warrior of the Philistines, Goliath. Sometimes it's the David who is the "sweet singer of Israel," playing his lyre and composing psalms.

What we don't hear much about in Sunday School (or even in adult Sunday School or worship services) are stories like the story of David and Bathsheba in our reading this morning. This one definitely deserves an "R" rating. It's a story that would rival any TV soap opera for its lurid tale of lust, abuse of power, manipulation, and murder. Not exactly destined for reruns on the Family Channel.

Interpreters of this story over the centuries, particularly painters who've used it as their subject, have given us a somewhat revisionist interpretation. In many paintings, Bathsheba has been depicted as a seductress, deliberately displaying her charms before the view of King David and luring him into a relationship. This may display the painter's bias making Bathsheba responsible for what happened to her or it may

just be a good excuse that painters in certain times needed to paint the nude female form.

But as our reading of the real story makes clear, Bathsheba was not responsible for what happened to her; she was simply taking the ritual bath, the *mikvah*, which was traditionally required in her culture for women following their monthly period. There's no suggestion of any sort, not even a hint, that Bathsheba has any agenda of her own or any part to play beyond being a passive object of King David's lust and greed. Women in that time and culture were considered property, first of their fathers, and later, of their husbands. Which may explain why the narrator says nothing about Bathsheba's reaction to any of this, or why in the telling, she goes so calmly to David afterward to tell him that she is pregnant, or why after the mourning for her husband is over, following his death in battle, there is no mention of resistance on her part to becoming one of David's wives in his harem. She is simply "collateral damage" in a story that is primarily about the arrogant abuse of kingly power.

David's power is secure; despite his reputation for military genius and prowess in battle, he no longer goes into the field at the head of his armies. Now he's secure enough in his power to stay behind in his palace while other men fight his battles for him. And like other kings in similar circumstances, he's got too much time on his hands, and so "idle hands being the devil's workshop," he projects his power elsewhere. The very pace at which the narrator tells the story and the rapid-fire succession of verbs in the description of David's dealings with Bathsheba underscores this point: he saw, he sent, he took, he slept with her.

He saw, he sent, he took. Some years earlier, when the Israelite tribes had been clamoring to have a king like the peoples around them, Samuel the prophet had warned them that if they got a king, they would be sorry, because it was the nature of kings to take more from their subjects than they gave. And this story surely bears out the validity of that warning. Kings are

takers. They take, simply because they can; they have the power.

Power is always a dynamic in every human relationship, whether it be on the larger scale of national or international relationships or on the smaller scale of the relationships within our marriages, our families, our colleagues or employees at work, or even with our friends. The only question is how we will use that power. To have power is to have the capability of doing what we wish to do. And so in every one of those relationships where power is a dynamic, we are faced with the choice between using that power to serve our own needs and wants or using it to meet the needs of others. In other words, we are always faced with the choice of exercising our power to *overpower* or *empower* others. Here, we see King David, the great hero, using his power to *overpower* Bathsheba, and the consequences are disastrous for everyone concerned.

But power that *overpowers* others has a built-in boomerang effect. In an instant, this power to take what one wants from another person with impunity, is shattered by the simple message Bathsheba sends back to David. *“I’m pregnant.”* Suddenly David is no longer in control of his own life or of events; he thinks he is, as his next series of actions indicates. But in reality, we the readers, know that events are now controlling him. The popular phrase for that these days is “the law of unintended consequences”— a law that we see played out on the national and international stage as well as in our personal lives.

David immediately moves into damage-control mode. He sends word to Joab his general, and asks him to send Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband, back from the battlefield for consultations with the King. Joab, who knows his king as well as anyone, having been his most trusted comrade in arms, knows that kings don’t call back mere captains for consultations. But he also knows how to keep on the good side of kingly power, so he orders Uriah back to talk to the king. When Uriah comes back and reports in to David, David goes

through a charade of asking him how the war’s going, and then suggests that he go on R&R for a day or two. The dialogue is between two old campaigners, in that earthy, machismo jargon of soldiering. “Why don’t you go on home, sleep in your own bed tonight, and uh, ‘wash your feet,’ (wink, wink, nudge, nudge).” That’s what the Hebrew euphemism “wash your feet” means. We have our own rather crude and earthy euphemisms, don’t we?

You’ve got to admit, it’s a pretty simple solution to David’s problem— though, again, hardly original. We, the readers, can readily believe it could happen, though the plot would then take a different turn. Two possibilities immediately suggest themselves: either Bathsheba could have a child that Uriah thinks is his own, and they live happily ever after; or the kid would turn out to be the “spitting image” of the king, leading to even more soap opera-ish possibilities.

But somehow, we know it’s not going to work as David hopes, don’t we? To David’s dismay, Uriah turns out to be a man who has more integrity than the king. He’s grateful for the chance to get away from the battlefield for a brief respite, but he’s more concerned with his fellow soldiers who are laying their lives on the line than he is with his own comforts. We don’t know what or how much Uriah knows or suspects, but he’s certainly presented as an upright and honorable soldier who won’t indulge himself while his comrades are making sacrifices. He’s a straight-up kind of guy that corrupt kings love to hate.

The scene where David cynically manipulates Uriah by getting him drunk, pretending to be good comrades-in-arms, but all the while plotting and planning and manipulating him into going home to sleep with his wife, is, again, a thoroughly repulsive and thoroughly real story.

So he resorts to a final act of desperation,

that is also an incredible act of arrogant abuse of power. He has Uriah carry a sealed letter back to Joab at the front, ordering him to send Uriah into the area where the fighting is the sharpest, and where it's virtually certain he'll be killed. What began as the selfish scratching of a royal itch, culminates in royal murder. The irony and pathos is almost overwhelming, isn't it? How disgusting! How horrifying! How typically human!

So David solves his problem, or so he thinks. The last word of our passage is Joab's ironically-phrased message to David, "*Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead.*" At last David can breathe freely again. Now, who will there be to accuse him of wrongdoing? His neck is out of the noose. . . or is it? Next week's episode will show us that problems that we create by abusing our power and try to solve by escalations of that abusive manipulation, even when we think we've buried them—literally buried them in David's case—inevitably come back to haunt us. The storyteller's point, after all, is that while David's story is a very human, if unedifying, story, David lives in a universe that is a moral universe. There is a greater power that David, in his arrogance, has forgotten about. There is a higher law than the king's writ, and in his passion, his fear, his greed, his cynical and abusive manipulations, he has been flaunting that law which will not be flouted forever. If David will not have to answer to Bathsheba and Uriah for his arrogance and abuse of power, he will have to answer to God. And the mills of God, though they may grind slowly, also grind exceedingly fine.

So Joab's message to David, will not, in fact, be the last word. Uriah may be dead, but we know that the relief David feels is a relief that cannot last. The refrain of the old anti-war song of the sixties, *Where Have All the Flowers Gone*, could well serve as an epilogue on this story, "*Oh, when will they ever learn, when will they ever learn?*"

But if our Old Testament lesson this

morning leaves us sobered and somewhat depressed by this all-too-human story of the use and abuse of power, our gospel lesson gives us hope that power need not necessarily always corrupt the one who exercises it.

Jesus discovered that he also had power. When he multiplied the loaves and fish to feed the multitude, they let him know that they would follow him anywhere. It has to be a scary feeling to know that you have that kind of power over others. It has to be a temptation, to take that power and run with it—to exploit it while it lasts, because, as every public figure knows, but too often forgets, power never lasts. It is constantly shifting, now given to one and now given to another often by the unintended consequences of its exercise.

But when the crowds want to make Jesus king because of his power, he refuses the gift. He withdraws and leaves the crowds behind, leaves their adulation behind, leaves their clamoring needs behind, leaves the pull of their affection and the burden of their praise behind and goes off alone to the mountain. He goes off to pray, to renew his sense of vocation, to renew his sense of his identity and mission, to get in touch again with the source of his life, and in so doing, shows us that the only safe way to exercise power is to use it for the benefit of others rather than for our own benefit. The way to avoid *overpowering* is to continually relinquish our need to control others, and in the process, *empower* others to rise to their own potential in freedom. And that is true no less in the arena of national and international politics as it is in interpersonal relationships. Power used in self-interest, whether at the personal or the national level cannot avoid becoming abusive. Power used in the best interests of the other transforms the situation for everyone for the good.

Ultimately, that is a choice we make, to use power to control others, or to serve others—to *overpower* or to *empower*. But it is a choice that we can make only by staying in touch with the

real Power, as Jesus did, through much self-examination and the self-knowledge gained through solitude and prayer. Prayer connects us to the only non-abusive source of power there is. God's power is never exploitative or destructive, but always uplifting, always directed toward restoring the wholeness of God's image in us and in our relationships.

We may not see the fruits of that redemption in the short term, nor will we escape the consequences of the exploitative ways we abuse our power in relationship to others. David and Bathsheba and Uriah paid a heavy price for David's abusive moment of self-indulgence. But God is in this project called humanity for the long term. And so the story does not end here. It is no accident, I think, that hundreds of years later, when St. Matthew began his gospel with a list of the ancestors of Jesus, he did something that was rarely, if ever, done in Jewish genealogies; he named a number of women among Jesus' ancestors, and one of them is Bathsheba. Matthew understood that no abuse of human power can ever ultimately thwart God's power to redeem and create new beginnings. That may give us hope that even the destructive consequences of our own abuses of power may be redeemed as well.