

## Sermon for June 12, 2016: What I did for love

Deborah White

Today is my mother's 89<sup>th</sup> birthday and, like all else in her life, she is approaching it with good cheer but without sentimentality. My mother is a product of her generation – the Greatest Generation. She is infinitely pragmatic - her most frequent admonition to me is not to “fuss” about things. It's not that she doesn't care; it's just that she sees excess emotion as having no purpose – and her life has always been about purpose. Like so many others of her generation, my mother's most distinguishing trait is faithfulness – a belief about what is right and the will to do it regardless of the personal cost – and to do it without “fuss” and bother. Such faithfulness requires strength, generosity, wisdom and *love*.

Those are the traits exhibited by the poor man in the story the prophet Nathan tells King David in this morning's Hebrew scripture reading. The poor man is a stand-in for Uriah the Hittite, who was a strong, dutiful, and *faithful* soldier of *his* generation who served his king and his country with honor.

The rich man of the story is, of course, that very king. Nathan's tale is a retelling of the well-known saga of David and Bathsheba, often described as a famous romance. We all know King David – how he rose from humble beginnings as the youngest of a family of modest herdsman to defeat the greatest (and biggest) general of the most terrible enemy of the Israelites. How, after his defeat of

Goliath with (maybe) nothing more than a slingshot, David became the favorite of the King and married the king's daughter. How King David loved God so much that he wrote psalms and sang and danced to God's glory in the sight of all of the people. And of course how ruddy and handsome he was. David was everything a hero needs to be – I can't imagine why Marvel hasn't bought the rights yet.

When David sees Bathsheba from afar, he is so smitten that he sends men to bring her to him so that he can be with her. When she becomes pregnant, he has her husband killed in battle to cover up his actions. Once Uriah is dead and buried, David marries her. So, let's be clear: this is not a love story - and David is not a hero. This is a story about power and how easy it is to abuse it – how easy it is to become faithless. David has forgotten his modest roots and become accustomed to getting whatever he wants and no one holds him accountable. No one tells him that it's not okay to treat a person as if she is simply a lamb to be used to satisfy the appetite of a powerful and selfish man. No one except Nathan, who, led by God, helps him understand that *he*, David, the king – the hero – is the rich man in the story - that the person who seems to be an example of a faithful servant of God – one to whom God gave so very much – is, by his own judgment, actually a sinner who is worthy of death.

But God did not kill David. God “put away” his sin and allowed him to live – and yet we know that David was never the same. His true repentance spared

him, but there were still repercussions for his actions. That's because, as David himself tells us in the words of the psalm that he is credited with writing, the Lord is merciful, but also instructive. For the rest of his long, hard life, David was repeatedly reminded of what he'd forgotten – that we *need* God – even when we think we don't – even when we think we're fine on our own. In order for us to live faithfully, we must be *in relationship* with God.

Otherwise, by definition, we live in sin, because that is what sin is - separation – separation from God *and* from one another. It is when we rely on our own strength that we make mistakes – that we hurt one another - and ourselves. And the only way to heal our brokenness is to acknowledge it and bind ourselves together again. Nothing - no perceived slight, no misunderstanding, no disagreement, is worth committing the sin of separation - because the essence of Christianity is *not* canon; it is *community*.

That's what Paul was telling the Galatians when he admonished them not to live *for* the law. Live *by* the law – yes – but live *for* and *in* God. That's something that Uriah the Hittite knew – that members of the Greatest Generation know – that King David learned – that in the end no one dies for a *law* – what people are willing to die for is *love* – and to allow ourselves to become separated from God and from one another is to forget that love. It is to become faithless.

The pain of separation and the power of restoring love is something the woman with the alabaster jar knew well. It is what allowed her to ignore the possible repercussions of angering and embarrassing herself in front of rich, powerful, people in order to do what her faith told her to do.

It is also what my mother did. The child of second-generation European immigrants, my mother understood what it was to be on the outside – to have a father who left school at 14 to care for his mother and sister after his father died. To make her own prom dress. And to be rejected by her in-laws, who, upon meeting her, told my father he was marrying beneath him. When I was born, my aunt told my jealous older sister that she needn't mind the new baby – “it” could belong to my mom's family – but my sister would learn to do things right, because she was part of the White family. But when my father, uncle, and aunt all died during the course of one year, it was my mother who made sure we remained close to that surviving aunt. And when my aunt developed Alzheimer's disease, it was my mother who absorbed her confusion, anger, and fear – even when she accused my mother of stealing from her. Even when my aunt insisted, in front of her, that I stop calling “that woman” my mother. It was my mother who continued to care for her, up to and beyond her death. Like the woman with the alabaster jar, my mother focused not on what would be said of her or to her, but on what was right – on what was needed.

I think the Pharisees who were dining with Jesus that night, like David, forgot that. The woman of the city knew what it was to need – and so gave all that she had – and loved with all of her heart. But indebted to no one and not recognizing the need of their own hearts, the dinner guest gave Jesus little.

I think something similar has happened in this country - and perhaps it is one reason for the steady decline in religious belief over recent years. So many of us have so much that we have started to believe that we don't really need *God*. We have forgotten what it means to have nothing but our ideals and one another to cling to. To have, like the woman of the city, only our faith. Maybe we are, like my aunt, too self-sufficient, too competent, and too correct to admit how much we need each other. Perhaps we have become too dignified and too proud to kneel at the feet of God and brokenly beg for mercy. Maybe we are just afraid of what we might lose if we throw ourselves into the powerful, exhausting, and sometimes ugly struggle that is true relationship.

But some of the greatest of us – those like my mother - do it all the time. And we can too. It is, as she would point out, simple. We merely need to let go of our pre-conceptions and our fears – to renew our relationships with God and one another by remembering who we are and what we have been called to do. Love God. Love one another. And then go in peace – knowing that our faith has saved us. AMEN.