

So Much To Be Thankful For
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(2 Samuel 11:2-5 NRSV) It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. {3} David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported, "This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite." {4} So David sent messengers to get her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house. {5} The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant."

When I was a little boy, my family would go to the Bell's Apple Orchard up in Lake Zurich Illinois. Every fall, it was a tradition for my family to make the trip to Bell's and spend the day picking apples.

There is one year that particularly sticks out in my head. We climbed into the car for the 30 minute drive and once we got there we headed off into the orchard to pick a bushel basket of fresh ripe apples.

As we set off into the orchard, there was an odd fellow there. He looked as if he might have been the original caretaker of the Garden of Eden — but he was obviously the caretaker of this orchard. He said to us:

“If you want the best apples you must go deep into the orchard, for you see the apples all along the fringes have been picked over, but as you go deeper into the orchard, you'll find the best fruit.”

Now I don't know if you can picture this or not — but in the Conger family there were 3 boys and we were probably between the ages of 11 and 7 — so the notion of going to an apple orchard the purpose was to pick apples it was not about walking, and walking and walking.

But somehow my parents had convinced us to walk quite a ways into the orchard — we felt that we had walked far enough. But just as soon as we set down our basket to begin picking apples we could hear that old man yelling — “GO DEEPER”

So we picked up our basket and went a little deeper into the orchard — again we set down our basket — and before we could begin putting apples into it, we could hear him shout his advice — “Go deeper, the best fruit's farther in.”

Again we trudged on, after a time we set down the basket and we could still hear him calling: “Go On — Go Deeper.”

This time we went a substantial distance farther in and discovered that indeed he was right. The finest reddest, ripest apples were untouched and just waiting for us!

It seems to me that what often passes for faith in our lives is not much different than that experience in the apple orchard.

We stay around the edges — not allowing our faith to grow or be challenged — content to lead lives that are unexamined. Lives in which we barely know ourselves and know God even less.

Is it any wonder that often the fruits of religious experience taste bitter and seem to bring so little nourishment to the lives of people who are starving and searching for something that will fulfill the deepest hungering of their souls.

But how can it be that a message that is as fresh and invigorating as the Bible offers to us — often becomes more like taking a dose of castor oil than biting into a juicy, refreshing apple.

Over the last Twenty-five years of ministry, what I have heard from countless people is that religion (Christianity) doesn't have the enjoyment of a fresh ripe apple.

Maybe, it is because we have been too busy picking from the rigid, moralistic trees that lie around the outer edges of our faith, and we have never bothered to take the time or the effort to go deeper into the truly satisfying experience of a God who receives us with love and with tender mercy.

It is at the center of the orchard that GRACE brings forth fruits of judgement and mercy that blossom together.

What we in the church often fail to bring into creative tension, the Bible illustrates marvelously with some of its greatest characters.

One of the great stories in the Bible which seems to illustrate this tension between grace and judgement is the story of David and Bathsheba. You all know the story don't you? Well, just in case you have forgotten, let me refresh your memory. I am going to be using the RSV to tell the story that is the Revised Steve Version.

In the heat of a late afternoon, King David fixed a double scotch and took a stroll out onto his balcony that overlooked the city. He reached down a pinched a good inch and reminded himself that he had better

start using that new nordic track that he bought for the palace. With a bored look, knowing that he possessed all that he could see - suddenly he stopped breathing for he noticed a naked women standing in a shallow pool dripping water over her shoulders with cupped hands. The sweltering afternoon seemed cool in comparison to how he suddenly felt. His passion buckled his knees - and in an attempted to quench his suddenly parched throat, David tossed down the whole drink and coughed a bit as either the scotch or the woman's beauty caught him off guard.

Like most over achievers, David was always looking for new horizons to conquer, and Bathsheba looked like just the kind of horizon a King might want to explore. It wasn't just her naked sensuality that David couldn't take his eyes off of - nor was it simply that having seen so much of death he needed some warmth and tenderness to make him feel alive again. NO, what buckled his knees and caused him to gulp his drink was the sudden overwhelming desire to have her at any cost - and the fear that the cost might be high indeed!! !

What really shocks you is the fact that not only is this a story from the Bible, but that David is the greatest king of Israel and the author of some of the most cherished poetry of all time. I am willing to bet that every one here knows at least one of his poems. How about THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD?

If we were really honest with each other, we would probably have preferred if the Biblical writers had left out this story — because generally we still like our religious leaders beyond reproach.

But it isn't just David the King that concerns the Bible, nor is it David the psalmist that we see here; instead what this story tends to expose is something more akin to all of us — David the human being whose knees buckled as a naked women tried to innocently bathe on that sultry afternoon.

When you continue to read the story we find out that this relationship which began with adultery was consummated in the murder of an innocent man, Bathsheba's husband Uriah.

Although the child created out of this illicit encounter dies, as if no good could come from such a liaison, in time a child named Solomon was born David and Bathsheba — but not before the prophet Nathan came to David with a story that once again had David's knees buckling.

Nathan told a cleverly apt parable about a rich guy with thousands of sheep who killed a poor man's pet lamb and served gyro sandwiches to his friends. Then Nathan launched into a sermon that gives new meaning to the word GUILT.

By the time Nathan had finished, David decided to cancel all of his appointments for the rest of the day and to slither away and lick his wounds and if you know the story, you know that his wounds were numerous!

This story has it all: LUST, ADULTERY, MURDER, DEATH; we open the Bible and it is God's eternal soap opera: "All My Children."

If you don't believe me, go home this afternoon and take a close look at Solomon's writings, or better yet - his life.

Usually this story is told to make moralistic illustrations about sin — and God knows it has enough sin for any TV series.

And if the story were to end here, there wouldn't be much else to say — so all of us decent church going people can just shake our heads and pray very hard that Steve will get back to the Gospel so that the worship service will be safe for children once again.

But the truth is — whatever sins you and I have committed have been safely hidden or forgotten, and we thank God that prophets like Nathan are few and far between.

HOWEVER, the problem with plastic saints who tell about their triumphs over sin using the past tense and saying wisely, but with just a tone of sadness: "Yes, I was once a sinner," is that they have missed the most important point about this story!!

It isn't that plastic saints are somehow not sinners anymore, the problem is that it is much more likely that our sins are so much more subtle and thus, potentially even more destructive and corrosive than ever.

If your knees haven't buckled recently from a sudden surge of raw desire and if you haven't done anything stupidly, flagrantly wrong in years, that doesn't necessarily mean that God is going to award you with a plaque for the Christian most likely to succeed.

It may mean nothing more profound than: your life is lived so cautiously and with such great control that even if God wanted to help you there would be no need, because you are managing quite well, thank you very much.

If it doesn't do anything else for us, our religious faith ought to take enough of the plastic out of our lives that we become real to one another and real to ourselves. The more subtle and hidden sin becomes, the harder it is to get past it. Sins of the spirit are no less sins than those of the flesh, and maybe our reaction to the story of David and Bathsheba is like that fellow that Jesus pointed out who was praying in the temple. Do you remember that story? The

man said quite proudly: "I thank God that I am not like other people."

It is in this context that Martin Luther could say, "Sin boldly. . . but trust God more boldly still."

SIN BOLDLY, . . . BUT TRUST GOD MORE BOLDLY STILL," said the father of the protestant reformation. By which he meant that religious faith should help us see ourselves honestly, and if we are going to play games with God, hide and seek won't get us anywhere.

The problem with our tendencies to posture and pretend that we are better people than we really are, is that our moralistic games leave us lonely, insecure, and worst of all, unforgiven!

The question that confronts us as we pick around the edges of the orchard is this: WHICH IS STRONGER AND MORE ENDURING, SIN OR GRACE?

How strong is God's grace?

How enduring is God's mercy?

How deep is God's love?

Face it. If the moral failures of our lives have the power to put us beyond the reach of God's gracious offer to love us and heal us, then God's grace isn't very strong at all. Is it?

It seems to me that Luther's wise advise to "SIN BOLDLY, . . . BUT TRUST GOD MORE BOLDLY STILL," reminds us that whatever holiness we may have is not of our own doing, but comes to us as the gracious gift of God.

And just to remind us of that, God came to us wrapped up in the clothing of human flesh.

When Jesus willing gave himself up to be killed, the point was made forever that God is big enough and has watched the human soap opera long enough to love us with a passion that should buckle our knees if we only understood it!

Too often, in a fear of failing, of making a mistake, afraid of sinning — we do nothing. We stay on the edges of our faith, where we think it is safe.

God says trust me

trust that I will stay with you

Trust that I can make something, even of your mistakes

If you are going to sin — sin trying to do something beautiful for God — and sin boldly, knowing that God is still in control.

Five years ago, that is exactly what Ridge Church did when we decided to build that fellowship hall. We knew that we could not pay for it at the time, but we knew, that it was necessary if we were to do what God was calling us to do.

Instead of taking the easy path — we chose to sin boldly — and to trust God more boldly still!

Without blinking at sin, without denying it, or rationalizing it, the Christian faith reminds us that sin is not the last word!!

The final word, the eternal word is GRACE!!!

I think that we must take sin very seriously, never blink at it, but yet, still proclaim with joy (Borrowing the words of Abraham Lincoln) that God must love sinners, "cause he made so many of them"

Deeper into the orchard of our faith we find that, in reality, THE MOMENTS OF OUR GREATEST SIN ARE THE MOMENTS OF GOD'S GREATEST OPPORTUNITY.

Our faith is not about candles and liturgies, altars or stained glass windows or beautiful buildings; our faith is about living creatively, sometimes failing, often falling short, but going on with our lives anyway, because who knows what God is going to create out of the mess that we have made.

By the way, in case you have forgotten and thought that the story of David and Bathsheba ends in the book of Samuel, and just in case I have left you with the impression that they were just a bunch of adulterers and murderers, let me remind you how the story ends - and let's see what God created out of this mess.

The birth of Jesus took place like this. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. Before they came to the marriage bed, Joseph discovered she was pregnant. (It was by the Holy Spirit, but he didn't know that.) Joseph, chagrined but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced.

While he was trying to figure a way out, he had a dream. God's angel spoke in the dream: "Joseph, son of David, don't hesitate to get married. Mary's pregnancy is Spirit-conceived. God's Holy Spirit has made her pregnant. She will bring a son to birth, and when she does, you, Joseph, will name him Jesus — 'God saves' — because he will save his people from their sins." This would bring the prophet's embryonic sermon to full term:

Watch for this — a virgin will get pregnant and bear a son;
They will name him Immanuel (Hebrew for "God is with us").

Then Joseph woke up. He did exactly what God's angel commanded in the dream: He married Mary. But he did not consummate the marriage until she had the baby. He named the baby Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25 The

Message)

Happy Mother's Day!

Amen.