

**CONFESSION**

*by Rev. Elaine Poproski*

David was a shepherd boy who lived in the Middle East 3000 years ago. He's remembered as a musician, a poet, a warrior, and a king. The apostle Paul referred to him as "a man after [God's] own heart."<sup>i</sup> Almost half the psalms in our Bible are attributed to David. His absolute faith in God shines particularly bright in the story of his childhood confrontation with Goliath – the enemy soldier giant that David slew with a slingshot and a stone. David is still regarded as one of the greatest leaders Israel every knew. One might be tempted to idolize him – to set him up on a pedestal as if he were a bit more than simply human. But we know he was a flawed as any of us. We know he was as infected by this thing we call sin, as are any of us.

The story is told in 2 Samuel 11, of a time well after David had been firmly established as the king. He'd fought many battles, conquered Jerusalem, and named it "the city of David."<sup>ii</sup> He'd brought the ark of God – a powerful symbol of God's presence and promises – into that same city amidst victory and celebration. He was a popular and powerful man among his people.

The story is told in 2 Samuel 11, of a time when David chose not to join his soldiers in their on-going battle for the Promised Land. He chose instead to remain in Jerusalem. We don't know why. Maybe he was tired of fighting. Maybe his body couldn't take it anymore. Maybe he had come to enjoy the comforts of home and all the rich benefits of being the king, and didn't want to leave it behind for the hardships of war. Maybe he had come to believe, even if just a little bit, that he was better than those who went to war – that war was for those less important than he. We don't know why David stayed behind. But we do know what he did instead of going to war. We read the story in 2 Samuel 11.

"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. David sent someone to inquire about the woman... [and then] sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he lay with her... Then she returned to her house. The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, 'I am pregnant.'"

So David sent for her husband, a soldier. He hoped the husband would come home, sleep with his wife, and everyone would assume the child was his. But the husband didn't sleep with his wife. As long as his fellow

soldiers were out in the muck and violence of war, he could not, in good conscience, enjoy the comforts of home. So David sent him back to the front. To the very front. With instructions to his commander in chief to make sure the husband didn't survive the next attack.

When the period of mourning for her husband's death was complete, David brought the woman to his house to be his seventh wife.

But the story doesn't end there. David didn't even seem to care what he'd done. As hard as it is to imagine, it was as if David was blind to what he'd done. So God sent the prophet Nathan, who told David a story about a rich man who stole from a poor man. Upon hearing the story, David was incensed and declared immediate judgment against the rich man. After which "Nathan said to David, 'You are the man!'"<sup>iii</sup> Nathan went on to speak God's words of accusation, recounting the whole story of David's sin. And he spoke God's judgment against David.

And David repented and was forgiven. (Though that forgiveness did not erase the consequences of what he'd done.)

Among all the things packed into this story of David's sin, the thing I'd like us to consider this morning is David's apparent blindness to his sin. It seems impossible that someone could do the things David did, and yet need to be told by Nathan that he'd behaved egregiously. Except, aren't we often just as blind to our sin?

There are so many ways to hide our sin from ourselves. One of the most popular is to blame someone else. This is Adam in the Garden of Eden, sheepishly standing before God after eating the forbidden fruit, saying to God, "The woman made me do it."<sup>iv</sup>

It seems obvious, doesn't it? Standing on the outside looking in? When a man drove a van down Yonge Street 4 years ago, killing 10 people and wounding many others, all of us knew he'd done something wrong – he had done something horrible. There was no doubt that his actions were completely out of line with God's will. His sin was brutally displayed for everyone to see. But just because we saw it that way, doesn't mean he did. In fact, he told investigators that he'd been inspired by the *incel* movement, a movement that justifies violence against women as an acceptable response to women's refusal to sleep with them.

We human beings are masters at justifying and rationalizing our behaviour. "She made me do it." "It's how I was raised." "I have the right." "The ends justify the means." "I didn't mean to." (As if the only thing that matters is our intent.) We are

so good at doing and saying whatever we have to if it means we won't have to face our own sin.

One of the ways we do this, is by admitting that we are sinners without actually admitting to any specific sin. Paul said it in his letter to the Romans: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."<sup>v</sup> That's o.k. We can accept that. It's in the Bible. We, along with the entirety of the human race from the beginning of time, have sinned. There's nothing specific about me or about you in that. It's all of us. It's part of what it means to be human. Also, it's not even really our fault. It's Satan's fault. We say with Eve, "The serpent tricked me. It's his fault."<sup>vi</sup>

Another popular thing we do is we focus on the letter of the law so we don't have to acknowledge what lies beneath. (The law being the things that are in line with God, the things that God has declared righteous and holy.) This is what the Pharisees of Jesus' day were so good at. That's why over and over again we read of Jesus saying, "You have heard it said...., but I say to you."

"You have heard it said, 'You shall not murder'... But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment..."<sup>vii</sup>

"You have heard it said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."<sup>viii</sup>

Sin isn't about lists of things we must or must not do. Sin is about our relationship with God. It's about our friendship with God. Sin is anything and everything that stands between us and God, that serves as a barrier between us and God. It's whatever makes us incompatible with God.

But Elaine, you might be thinking, isn't this why Jesus came and died on the cross? Isn't the whole point of Jesus that he paid for my sin? Isn't the whole point that Jesus reconciled us to God? that Jesus restored our relationship with God? Why all this talk about sin? Jesus dealt with it. It's done. It's over.

Yes. That is correct. In absorbing all the evil and sin of humanity, Jesus saved us. He defeated the darkness that is sin. The Apostle Paul wrote that God "reconciled us to himself through Christ ... [by making] him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."<sup>ix</sup> Jesus became sin as he hung on that cross. It was so absorbed into him that he became the embodiment of our sin so that we could be righteous, so that we could have friendship with God. We are, to further quote Paul, "a new creation."<sup>x</sup>

But this truth that we are a new creation, that we have been reconciled to God through the cross, does not negate what seems like a paradoxical truth, that we also continue to live lives plagued by sin. The cross doesn't mean that we human beings have been perfect from that point on. Or even that we human beings who are followers of Jesus have been perfect from that point on. We know that is not true. We know it by looking around us. We know it when looking with just an ounce of honesty at ourselves. We do things, we say things that are contrary to God. That's because our salvation – what Jesus did on the cross - while it's a fixed historical event, is also an on-going process. This is what Paul was talking about when he wrote that we should “work out [our] salvation with fear and trembling.”<sup>xi</sup> This is one of the reasons Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to live in us and among us.

It is the Holy Spirit who teaches what it means to be reconciled to God, to be loved by God. It is the Holy Spirit who inspires and empowers us to be more like Jesus. It is the Holy Spirit who works through us to continue Jesus' mission in the world. And it is the Holy Spirit who uncovers our sin for us – who opens our eyes to our sin, if we allow it.

This is what the prophet Nathan did for King David when he told him the story about the rich man who stole from the poor man and then told him the rich man was David. We may find it nearly impossible to understand how David could have been blind to his sin, but the point is that when David's eyes were finally opened, he responded by saying, “I have sinned against the Lord.”<sup>xii</sup> He confessed. He admitted his wrongdoing. He recognized that his actions separated him from God.

One of the things I love about this story is that David didn't turn to Nathan and say, “But it's her fault! She was bathing, naked, in the privacy of her own roof. How I supposed to resist?” He didn't say, “I gave Uriah a chance to sleep with his wife so the pregnancy could be his, but he didn't take the chance.”

David didn't blame anyone else. He took responsibility. He acknowledged, “I have sinned against the Lord.”

Tradition tells us that David wrote Psalm 51, which we spent some time with at the beginning of our service, in response to this encounter with Nathan. It's his confession, his plea for mercy, his humbled presence before God.

When we are confronted by our own sin, whether because we have taken notice of it or it's been revealed to us by a prophet, by the Holy Spirit, by someone else, it humbles us. I think that's one of the reasons we prefer to stay blind to our sin. Being humbled is not a nice experience.

Confession is a Spiritual Discipline. It's not something we just do when we happen to notice that we did something wrong. It's a discipline. It's something that requires practice; it requires that we intentionally incorporate it into our lives in a way that makes it a habit. And yet, if confession is at least in part dependent on the Holy Spirit opening our eyes to our sin, how do we engage this Spiritual Discipline without diminishing it, without losing the significance of the act?

When we talked about prayer... as a Spiritual Discipline it's something that we set aside time for, we engage in certain practices, and we trust that God meets us through his Holy Spirit in that. It's something that we do – we have an active role in it. But somehow confession, as a Spiritual Discipline, seems a bit different, because it depends on our awareness of our sin. And not just our general sinfulness, though it's good to confess that as well, but confession as a Spiritual Discipline is meant to be about confessing those things that are unique to us – those things that we have done or not done, those things that we have said or not said – the actual sin, by name, that we have perpetrated.

The Spiritual Discipline of Confession ensures that we intentionally take time to reflect, to listen for the leading and the prompting of the Holy Spirit, and to admit those things before God.

Spiritual Disciplines put us in a position to know God more and more intimately, our ears are increasingly attuned to the Spirit's prompting. This prompting includes awareness of our own sin.

The thing is, sometimes we do something, or we say something, and our sin is obvious, and we can't lie to ourselves. Maybe we lose our patience with someone and treat them badly as a result. Maybe we're in such a hurry about our own business that we intentionally turn a blind eye to someone else's need. Maybe we stole something, or we lied to someone, or we made fun of someone, or we gossiped about someone. Whatever it is, sometimes our sin is obvious to us. But even when it's obvious, perhaps it's worth spending some time in quiet, listening for the voice of the Holy Spirit, considering if there's some deeper, hidden area of sin that underlies whatever it is we're aware of. Maybe underlying however we've behaved is a sense that we're better than someone else. Maybe we're jealous. Maybe we feel entitled.

The Spiritual Discipline of Confession requires our honesty. It requires our willingness to admit, not just the ways we fail to honour God, but the ways we don't honour ourselves or other people. But the Spiritual Discipline of Confession is incomplete if all we do is admit our sin. We must also repent. This means we

turn away from our sin. It means we recognize that our sin separates us from God, and we decide that we don't want to be separated from God. It means asking the Holy Spirit to teach us and empower us not to repeat our sin. We could confess over and over and over again, but if it's not accompanied by repentance – by a turning away from our sin – we will just continue in the same kind of sin.

The reality is, we do repeat our sins. Even when we've confessed, even when we've genuinely repented, we fall again – we repeat the exact same thing again. The Apostle Paul knew this as truly as we know it. He wrote, "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."<sup>xiii</sup> If the Apostle Paul had this problem, then I think it's ok for us to admit that we have this problem. Even when we genuinely don't want to, sometimes our sin is rooted so deep in us, it takes time coupled with consistent attentiveness and the involvement of the Holy Spirit to completely free us. But I can tell you from experience that freedom is available. Freedom is what God wants for us. Freedom is why Jesus died for us. And as we practice the Spiritual Discipline of Confession, the truth of that freedom becomes our reality (usually not overnight, but it happens as we incorporate the Spiritual Discipline – as day after day after day we take an honest look at ourselves, name those things that are out of line with God, and we repent of those things that are out of line with God).

We confess our sin. We admit whatever it is that is not in line with God's will. And we repent. We turn away from that sin and back toward God. And that is where we discover the most incredible thing... We are forgiven. We are freed. We are cleansed. We are made new again. There are so many metaphors, so many words and phrases that are used to describe the extraordinariness of the power of God's love, of God's grace, of God's mercy. All of those are words that mean that when we confess, when we turn away from our sin, that separation from God is removed and we are once again connected to God in friendship. We are forgiven. We know what it is to be loved.

God has said, "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin."<sup>xiv</sup> This is something God spoke to the people of Israel. They over and over and over again turned away from God as a nation and God said to them, "If my people who are called by name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin."

Isaiah wrote, "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them



return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”<sup>xv</sup>

John wrote, “If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”<sup>xvi</sup>

I don’t know how hard it is for you to confess your sins – to admit your wrongdoing. I don’t know how hard it is for you to then repent – to turn away from your sin and to God. Some of those things have a really strong hold on us and it takes everything we have to even want to turn away from them; it takes nothing less than the Holy Spirit himself to make us want to turn away from those things. But the thing we know, no matter what, is that “if we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

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<sup>i</sup> Acts 13:22  
<sup>ii</sup> 2 Samuel 5:9  
<sup>iii</sup> 2 Samuel 12:7  
<sup>iv</sup> Genesis 3:12  
<sup>v</sup> Romans 3:23  
<sup>vi</sup> Genesis 3:13  
<sup>vii</sup> Matthew 5:21-22  
<sup>viii</sup> Matthew 5:27-28  
<sup>ix</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:18, 21  
<sup>x</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17  
<sup>xi</sup> Philippians 2:12  
<sup>xii</sup> 2 Samuel 12:13  
<sup>xiii</sup> Romans 7:19  
<sup>xiv</sup> 2 Chronicles 7:14  
<sup>xv</sup> Isaiah 55:6-7  
<sup>xvi</sup> 1 John 1:9-10