

A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, on July 13, 2008, dedicated to Nolan Chambers on his baptismal day and always to the glory of God!

## ***“When Religious Resistance Trumps Political Power”***

### ***II Samuel, 12:1-15a***

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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This is the story of a king and a prophet. It is a story of treachery in which the politically powerful king seeks to sidestep the moral presence of the prophet.

Like all too many kings before him and after him, King David believes he can get away with murder. What starts with David’s lust for Bathsheba spins into adultery and produces pregnancy as King David moves down the path toward murder on the steppingstones of treachery.

David creates “Plan A” for covering his sins. David, the commander-in-chief of the Army, calls Uriah home from war.

David attempts to get him to sleep with his own wife. But, Uriah is an honorable man and a faithful soldier. He will not break the military code that says a soldier may not sleep with his wife during wartime.

With Plan A a flop, David concocts “Plan B.” He sends Uriah back to the battlefield with orders to Joab to have Uriah lead an unwinnable charge against the enemy’s finest fighters. Joab can read between the lines, but being a hatchet man, he sends Uriah – a principled man and true soldier of the king – into a battle that cannot be won. In a war of David’s making, in a battle that need not have happened, Uriah and others are killed because of David’s adultery and treachery.

David receives the news from the battlefield. He exhales slowly with relief – never mind the murder and the slaughter of other soldiers in the rest of the report. The pregnancy is reassigned to the dead Uriah. The truth is concealed. The guilt is passed. The monarchy is saved, or so it seems. David marries Bathsheba (whom Matthew’s Gospel refers to as “the wife of Uriah”). Throughout the scheming and treachery, God is seemingly silent until the last verse of II Samuel 11:27: “*The thing was evil in the eyes of Yahweh.*”

Walter Brueggemann writes in his commentary on First and Second Samuel: *The king may act. The king may kill. The king may be self-satisfied. But, the text leaves no doubt that the eyes of God outsee the eyes of David. David is blind to his own fears, lust, and power – but that doesn’t change the moral reality to which David must answer.* (First and Second Samuel, interpretation series, Walter Brueggemann, John Knox Press, Louisville, KY,

pp. 272-279).

David thinks no one would notice what happened. But, he has failed to reckon with the seeing eyes of Yahweh and the discerning word of Nathan, God's prophet. Although we are not sure how Nathan gets here, he obviously belongs in David's presence. He tells a clear and simple parable (v.1-4):

*There were two men, one rich and one poor. The rich man is not very interesting. It does not take long to describe and dismiss him. He has everything – period. End of description. The poor man occupies our attention. He has one female lamb. The lamb was his whole property, his livelihood . . . The one lamb was like a treasured daughter, which he nurtured and to which he gave food and drink from his own cup.*

*The rich man needs lunch and does not wish to kill any of his own sheep. So, he ingeniously **takes** the little lamb daughter of the poor man. He took what was not his and treats it as if it were his own. He steals from the poor man, taking all that matters to him. (Brueggemann, pp. 279-280).*

As David receives the parable, his anger is kindled against the rich man in the story. He declares that this man must die for his behaviors and he shall restore the lamb fourfold. Spoken like a true king of Israel!

With the king's edict hanging in the air, the narrative shifts to the prophet and how to speak truth to power. Nathan addresses the king. This can be dangerous business especially with a king who is so cynical, immoral and desperate.

In a direct and clear word, Nathan declares: **“You are the man!”** David has broken three commandments – coveting, adultery and killing. He will pay for his crimes. All are grounds for impeachment, and the death penalty. The edict upon his throne is one that will touch David’s house and David’s lineage for all time to come! A sword will be upon David’s name. God’s judgment will follow him and all generations who bear his name! Overcome by shame and judgment, David comes to himself, falls on his face and confesses his sins before Nathan and before Yahweh.

**Religious resistance trumps political persistence and power.** But, in this confrontation between prophet and king, we see that the prophet is not interested in destroying the king but in changing his heart. Nathan calls David to account. He doesn’t call for him to leave the throne. There is a purity in purpose in this exchange and lessons to be learned.

**The first lesson: For people of faith, belief in God is a totality.** Religion is not merely an aspect of life. It is not a passing fancy for leisure time hours. Faith in God is all in all. It is not a game. While this rarely gets played out as dramatically as the confrontation between Nathan and David, I would contend it is played out each day, all across our globe by people of all faiths.

In his book, *God’s Name in Vain*, Stephen L. Carter posits that:

*To the faithful, there is no part of the day that is outside of God’s view. To be sure, very few religionists anywhere in*

*the world live lives quite as faithful as they believe they should. But our religious faith helps us see the road we should be traveling, even if our human weakness often makes us travel it poorly. (Carter, God's Name in Vain, Basic Books, New York, p. 25).*

Carter continues:

*Human life is characterized by a search for meaning . . . and what is religion, after all, but a narrative a people tells itself about its relationship with God, usually over an extended period of time. And if the narrative is truly about the meaning God assigns to the world, the follower of the religion, if truly faithful, can hardly select a different meaning simply because the state says so. **That is why deeply religious visions always seem so radical.***

In the face of the political power, this religious vision is uncompromising, because the primary narrative is based in faith, not politics.

**Second Lesson: Religion and state are often in competition to explain to their people the meaning of the world.** In doing so, we speak different languages. And that is why religion and state crash into each other so often. Unless someone can translate, the language differences may never be understood. In the interfaith work I do, I see this all the time. I also see that without good translators, some politicians become disgusted with certain religious people or all religious people. The same becomes true on the other side. The cadence of faith and politics, without leadership on both sides, has the potential of becoming yet another polarizing language for our times. Jim Wallis' book title,

*God's Politics: Why the Right is Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*, is an apt description of this problem.

I often see certain politicians viewing religious people as a threat to power – and vice versa to a certain extent. As I work in Columbus and in Ohio on many issues of social justice with a wide cross-section of religious and some nonreligious people, I have found more often common language and common ground between people of a wide range of theological perspectives, while finding it a struggle at times to identify the common good and common ground with various government leaders.

This classic conflict played itself out days after Katrina struck New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. I began receiving calls from across the city that we needed to hold a meeting on how people of faith could respond. We mobilized a citywide meeting at our church – more than 300 people of ALL faiths came to our sanctuary on hot late summer night to pray for our sisters and brothers on the Gulf Coast. We sang. We prayed. We heard stories from family members directly or indirectly affected by the tragedy. We had unity in our different languages of faith: charity for the forsaken and justice for all.

As we began to mobilize for action, everyone in the room was prepared to go to the Gulf Coast or receive people in their churches, synagogues, temples or mosques. Just then down the center aisle of the church marched one of our local political leaders, surrounded by aids. The person took the microphone from one of our lay leaders and started telling people what was going to happen in Franklin County. With a patronizing tone, the person said: *"It's nice you are praying,*

*but, your elected officials know what we have to do and we have the crisis response under control.”* The air left the room.

As one woman said, while shaking her head and walking out the door: *“We weren’t praying to be nice, and let’s be clear: no one in America has this crisis under control. Only God can do that and my God is weeping right now for his dead and dying children.”* There were two languages not communicating on one subject.

**Lesson #3 – Religious people, as a totality, will NEVER be idol bystanders.** While some may proudly be sideline Christians choosing not to enter the messy business of engaging struggles in the public arena, I guarantee when one team is on the sideline, the other will take the field and proudly and defiantly defend it – from their theological and often political perspective. We have seen this play itself out throughout American history.

As people of faith, some of us, at any given time, have taken the field in religious resistance to political power. One challenge is taking the field with a game plan. Without a strategy, the end comes quickly. The other challenge is not leaving the stadium when catching your breath off the field, which I have seen my people do for a generation.

In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the social gospel movement, led by coaches Walter Raushenbusch, Washington Gladden and others, took the gospel of social salvation for all God’s children onto the streets of Columbus, New York and the world and into the halls of power. Later, Dr. King and the civil rights leaders of the 1950s and 1960s took the field for social justice. In the 1980s and 1990s,

Revs. Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, and James Dobson, carried the flag onto the field for the religious right. For most of the past 25 years, they and their televangelist buddies have dominated the field of play in the public square. But, again, the wind is shifting. Some of us have been among the windshifters in this new movement. It is my hope and prayer that we all become a part of this shifting experience.

In the arena of faith and politics, we need to remember that the job of politicians is to be elected and re-elected, while people of faith will continue to seek justice, however we define it. As Carter puts it in his book:

*There is a sharp distinction between knowing what needs to be done and choosing the people to do it . . . The prophetic religious voice, calling the world to account, pointing us in the direction of God's will, is a very different voice from the one that tries to tell us who should be in charge" ( p. 28).*

**Final Lesson - #4 - Throughout time, the prophets do not call for new rulers, they insist that the rulers rule differently.** Good kings are better than bad ones, but the bad ones always have the chance to become good (Carter, p. 29). Following the model of Nathan with David, we need to push back against the political power when it spins out of control, but our challenge must always be for transformation and change, not merely for the head of the king on a platter. Remember the word of God in the Psalms: *"I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his ways and live."* This should be our prayer and our action as well.

Religious resistance to political power is the challenge that is ever before us. Let us never lose the nerve or faith to step onto the playing field in the public square and work together for the transformation of our leaders and our society in our work for justice for all. Amen.

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