



“You’re the Man!”

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2 Sam. 11:26–12:13a (NRSV)

As a country girl and a middle-age white woman, I am not what you’d call “up to date” on all the current street slang, but I know this much, the pronouncement “You’re the man!” is generally thought of as a compliment on the streets of America’s cities. This declaration is usually said as an affirmation of a man’s actions in a given situation, and it can even signal that “the man” in reference has behaved in a way that is considered ideal and worthy of emulation by his peers.

Now, flash back almost 2600 years to the time of King David, when these same words were said by the prophet Nathan to King David; but make no mistake, Nathan’s declaration “You’re the man!” to David had an entirely different meaning.

Nathan’s words were an indictment of the king’s behavior, and they put him on notice that he had sinned against God and his neighbors, and that God was going to render judgment on him on account of his transgressions.

And what were his transgressions?

Last Sunday we were reminded of David’s adulterous relationship with Bathsheba, the wife of his most faithful soldier, Uriah, which culminated in the king sending Uriah to the frontline of battle where he was killed in order to hide the king’s indiscretions.

II

Today we pick up where last Sunday’s reading left off. Uriah is now dead. Bathsheba has been in mourning for her husband, and has just completed the appropriate Jewish mourning rites. David now, given his first religiously appropriate opportunity, brings Bathsheba into his house and takes her as a wife, and she gives birth to their son.

The way Israel remembers the story, the king’s behavior displeased God. In fact, God was so displeased that God dispatched the prophet Nathan to break this news to David. Nathan was humbled by the assignment, and clearly knew that messengers who deliver these types of messages don’t often live to repeat them. So he wisely chose an indirect

approach to communicate God's message to the king. He told the king a parable, and invited him to pronounce judgment on the subject in that parable. The subject, of course, was metaphorically speaking, the king himself. Nathan's story went like this:

There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.

Then Nathan paused and asked the king what he thought of the rich man's behavior.

The king was quick to condemn the rich man's actions, and said that he should repay the poor man fourfold, and that he should be condemned to death.

Without missing a beat, Nathan said to David. "You are the man!"

Then the prophet went on quickly reciting the many blessings that God had bestowed upon the king, and asked David why he had despised the Lord, and he pronounced divine judgment on David's house saying:

[God] will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun. For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun. (II Sam. 12:11)

The scene in today's reading closes with David doing what kings rarely if ever do. King David admits that he was wrong. "[He] said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the Lord.'" (II Sam. 12:12)

Now that's a stunning conclusion to a salacious story! A man with very human motives and king-sized opportunity to act on them, took seriously God's indictment and confessed his sins. As we learn later in the story of David, the king not only admitted that he was wrong, he asked for God's forgiveness, and strove to live a better life.

So David was a man among men. He had feet of clay. He was human like the rest of us. But that was not all. David was unique in the eyes of Ancient Israel from other rich and powerful people in that he faced up to the truth about his life and took responsibility for his actions and for changing his behavior. As a result, the much-needed healing in his life could begin.

III

Admitting our mistakes is not an easy thing to do on a personal or a political level. Such admissions require of us a certain level of spiritual and emotional maturity.

This past week, for example, the world watched as President Obama, Vice President Biden, Professor Gates, and Sergeant Crowley met for what's been dubbed "the Beer Summit," in the Whitehouse Rose Garden.

Some of us also listened to a press statement made by Lucia Whalen, the Harvard employee who called 9-1-1 during her lunch-break walk in response to Professor Gates' elderly neighbor's concern that someone might have been breaking into a home in their Cambridge, Massachusetts, neighborhood.

From all of the press coverage we can deduce that assumptions were made. Words were said. Tempers flared. And in a matter of moments, a newly forming scab on the corner of a deep cut in the social wound of our society was broken open once again.

(Lest I fall into the same trap as our President, let me say that I doubt despite all of the news coverage we have encountered that we will ever know *all* that led up the Beer Summit this past week.)

I realize too that some think that the very idea of a "Beer Summit" is problematic, in that it may seem to trivialize the significant antiracism work that is needed in our nation. I respect these view points and generally agree with them. But, I also believe that we have to start somewhere, and that we must address racism on a neighbor-to-neighbor level, or we will never realize the vision of equality that we aspire to in our nation or in our faith tradition.

Let's think for a moment about what contributed to the mess that led up to the Beer Summit. Here are some ingredients that we have learned about through the press this past week:

- We learned that Dr. Gates, a weary professor who had returned home from a long overseas trip, discovered that he had locked himself out of his home, and in his fatigue and frustration berated an officer who tried to protect his property;
- We learned that Sergeant Crowley, the man who arrested him, has actively worked to reduce racism in the Cambridge community, and because of his arrest of Dr. Gates was defined as a racist by many;
- We also learned that two neighbors trying to be Good Samaritans triggered an avalanche of events that neither could have anticipated (one was an unnamed woman, who thought she saw a man trying to break into a home in her neighborhood, and the other was Lucia Whalen, a *Harvard Magazine* employee on her lunch break, who was walking through Gates' neighborhood, and who responded to the elderly neighbor's request to call 9-1-1);

- We also saw President Obama, a man who has striven to affirm racial unity amidst our growing national diversity, found himself caught in the trap that he has tried to encourage others to avoid; and
- Perhaps the rest of us were left thinking, “There but by the grace of God go I.”

Each of these characters in this week’s news drama seems like a capable professional, who acted with the best of intentions based on the information that he or she had, and still all of them found themselves caught in a dragnet of racial discord that illustrates yet again how far we have to go towards healing the affects of racism in our society.

Perhaps anyone of us could have played any one of the parts that were played in this past week’s press-related drama. Anyone of us could have acted on limited information with the best of intentions and made off-the-cuff irrational statements which led ourselves and others to play out all-too-familiar racial narratives in our country. So in this regard we may hear the prophetic message of Nathan saying to us, “You are the man.” Or “you are the woman.” In other words, may realize how vulnerable we are to playing into racial stereotypes, and playing out racial narratives that have been cultivated in our society. But the story doesn’t end there.

It doesn’t end with whatever indictment that we sense may be made about our actions or inactions. As we learn from David and countless other biblical heroes, confession is not the be-all-and-end-all of the divine and human story. It is often just the beginning. It is the beginning of wisdom. And it can be the first step toward healing something that is wrong in our individual or corporate lives.

What impresses me most, for example, about last week’s drama is not the mess itself, but the steps that key players took to begin some healing in the racial rift that was seemingly widened at least at first last week. Some of the baby steps that we learned about in this drama included the following:

- 1) The fact that a multiracial alliance of police officers backed up Sergeant Crowley’s credentials.
- 2) The fact that Sergeant Crowley told reporters before the Beer Summit that he was looking forward to the conversation with Professor Gates and that he was sure that he could learn some things from the professor.
- 3) The Professor and the Sergeant announced after the conversation at the Whitehouse that they would continue to meet and converse about race relations, focusing more on the future than the past.
- 4) The President acknowledged that he could have handled the off-handed question from the reporter better than he did. ¹

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/07/30/harvard.arrest.beers/index.html>

- 5) Professor Gates sent flowers and a personal note to Lucia Whalen, the woman who called 9-1-1 about a possible break-in reported to her by one of Gates' neighbors.²
- 6) And, more Americans perhaps than ever are reflecting on the phenomenon of racial profiling in our society, and pondering how this phenomenon affects police training and interactions with the public, and how much work is still needed to dismantle racism in our society.

The thought occurs to me too that a further step that we all might take—regardless of what city we live in—is to reinstate the old-fashioned practice of organizing and holding block parties in our neighborhoods. Such events could provide an occasion for neighbors to get better acquainted, learn a little about each others' heritage, and know whether a person trying to open a door on our street lives there or might be a burglar.

Such occasions might also cause us to forge trusting relationships with our neighbors, so that one of our neighbors might become the person with whom we leave a spare set of keys which we could access if we inadvertently lock ourselves out of the house.

IV

In closing, whether we are talking about race relations or other kinds of relationships that show signs of wear and tear in our lives, I suspect that we agree: it is not easy to face up to the mistakes that we have made. It is not easy to make the changes that may be called for. It is not easy to probe the pain and begin the healing that may be needed. This kind of work isn't easy. It isn't pretty. It isn't fun. But it is faithful.

And the truth is that facing up to the hard and unresolved issues in our lives on personal and political levels is crucial—not just in terms of our individual spiritual health—but in terms of our relationships with our loved ones, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. It is also crucial to the spiritual health of the communities in which we live.

The good news, as we learn from David's example, is that freedom and grace flow from facing up to our mistakes, asking for forgiveness, and striving to live amended lives. Through David's life we see the gospel truth revealed, which is that we worship a God who can hear our confessions, forgive our transgressions, and help us make a way out of the worst messes that we can get ourselves into. Thanks be to God. Amen.

² <http://www.cnn.com/2009/US/08/01/harvard.gates.flowers/index.html>