

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost – July 26 2015 (17th Sunday of the liturgical year)
St John the Baptist Anglican Church, Pinetown, KZN
2 Samuel 11:1-15
Psalm 14
Ephesians 3:14-21
John 6:1-21

O God who took human flesh that you might be intimate with us: may we so taste and touch you in our bodily life that we may discern and celebrate your body in the world, through Jesus Christ, Amen.

Following the liturgical calendar we find ourselves squarely in Ordinary Time – and we might expect a gentle rhythm in this season – but instead we are challenged with a brutal text about war and adultery and unconscionable violence . Before we delve into the text, I want to examine the terminology.

“Adulterate means to water down, to debase or make impure by adding inferior materials or elements; use cheaper, inferior, or less desirable goods in the production of (any professedly genuine article).” For example, My mother-in-law says: “I would never adulterate such good wine with ice.”

“Adultery (anglicised from Latin *adulterium*) is extramarital sex that is considered objectionable on social, religious, moral or legal grounds. Though what sexual activities constitute adultery varies, as well as the social, religious and legal consequences, the concept exists in many cultures and is similar in Islam, Christianity and Judaism. Historically, many cultures have considered adultery a very serious crime. Adultery often incurred severe punishment, usually for the woman and sometimes for the man, with penalties including capital punishment, mutilation or torture. Such punishments have gradually fallen into disfavor, especially in Western countries from the 19th century [...] In some societies and among certain religious adherents, adultery may affect the social status of those involved, and may result in social ostracism.”

But what I want to clarify is that traditionally adultery concerned the woman’s moral, material and physical wellbeing far more than the man’s. This concern was not about protecting women - it was about the corruption of the bodies of women who were considered to be the property of men. Adultery described possible watering down of the bloodlines by not keeping pure and certain the paternity of the issue in question (namely the babies). Because after all, why should husbands be responsible for the babies of other men? Rather just execute the offending women (even if the so called adultery was not a consensual arrangement). Adultery constituted a dispute between men over property rights.

Now let’s return to the beginning of this passage. There is a strange normalisation of political warfare in the Old Testament passage that begins at 2 Samuel 11: “In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him.” Because **of course** people **always** go to war in the springtime... Notice how the language of war equates with the language of sexual conquest: “they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah.” Ravaging and

besieging. What happens on the battlefield translates dangerously into what happens in the bedroom.

And in this story there is a seamless transition between battlefield and bedroom and back again. This is not a love story. This is a story of violence and violation. Consider the brevity of the narrator's description of the actions that precede and follow the sex act between David and Bathsheba:

"David sent someone to inquire about the woman" (3a); "So David sent messengers to get her" (4a); "He lay with her" (4a); "She returned to her house" (4b). There is lust, calculation, conquest and the passage goes as far as to suggest sexual coercion. The Hebrew verb "to take" in verse 4 (translated as "to get" in the NRSV) recalls Samuel's warning to Israel about the nature of kings: "These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take . . ." (1 Samuel 8:11-18). He will take your sons, your daughters, your fields, your wealth. Coercive power will be, according to Samuel, characteristic of the "ways" of the king. (Commentary by Robert Hoch https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1345)

We hear Bathsheba's voice only once in the text and her utterance exposes her deep vulnerability, "I am pregnant" (5b). She knows that she risks severe punishment or even death. David seems to try to send Uriah home to Bathsheba in order to cover his tracks, so to speak. But Uriah refuses to play along – so he is the one who is executed instead. There is a strange normalisation of a king taking what he wants and swiftly dispatching (and silencing) anyone who gets in his way.

Naim Ateek is a Palestinian Anglican Priest and Liberation Theologian who is a friend of my parents. He says this about the importance of grappling with the more complex scriptures: "It is part of the genius of the Bible that it preserved a record both of the good and of the bad." This particularly brutal passage that we have read today asks us to contemplate the ways in which people in power exploit ordinary people. How does this story help us to reconsider adultery? It is not about moralism – or blame or guilt for that matter. It is not even about sex, actually. It is about power and consent. It is about respect for others as autonomous and valuable beings. Respect means to look again – to see with new eyes. Respect means to see the inherent value.

We human beings are complex creatures – our bodies are overcome with desire and emotion and pain and pleasure. Our bodies are the context in which we experience the world and the vehicles for how we interact with other bodies and how we encounter God. I will not disparage the body – or sex for that matter. I will never declare that spirit is good and bodies are bad – for without bodies we could never house the spirit or experience intimacy. Jesus loved our human form. He took care of bodies – he touched them and he fed them. He loved people who felt rejected and restored them to wholeness and community. Yet ironically Christianity as a religion (tragically) seems to instruct people to be self-loathing and damaging of our physical incarnation – and therefore of other peoples' bodily incarnations too. There is the old adage that "Hurt people hurt people". But Jesus is the living proof that God loves our human form. God chose to "pitch his tent among us" and walk with us in all of our splendor and brokenness. And Jesus shows us that "Transformed people transform people."

Remember that we are not born broken or self-loathing. Think of the unselfconsciousness of children – children who are still comfortably free in their bodies because they have not yet been taught to think that they are dirty or wicked or sinful or broken or bad. Children are still trusting and hopeful. And so a little child leads us to the story of the miraculous feeding of the 5000. Jesus uses the example of the trust and hopefulness of an innocent child who offers the little lunch that he had – 5 loaves and 2 fish – to be shared by all. With this meager offering Jesus transforms a large (and possibly disgruntled) crowd into a calm and cohesive community enjoying a completely satisfying Eucharistic feast. Paul Fromberg, rector of St. Gregory of Nyssa Church in San Francisco liked to say that “the surest sign of Jesus' real presence in the Eucharist is when there's someone completely inappropriate at the altar.” Jesus shows us that no one is inappropriate – he shows us that children belong and deserve to be fed as well. Because after all the loaves and the fish were in the child's lunch box.

So today our two lectionary stories markedly contrast two manifestations of power. On the one hand we have King David walking on the rooftop of the castle – he has power over women bodies. He has power over men's bodies too. David has power over the lives and deaths of his loyal soldiers and the women in his realm. We see clear exploitation of others in a self-serving capacity. David is walking on the bodies of Bathsheba and Uriah - and even on his unborn child. These bodies are expendable. They are property to be used and thrown away.

But Jesus has a different relationship with people and with power. “When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.” Jesus has no need of or desire for castle rooftops. He walks on water. Water – as clear and as insubstantial and as powerful as the elements come. Jesus cares for the whole crowd – of 5000 people – a much larger number of bodies than the disciples think can be attended to... In fact, the disciples have given up before the picnic even starts. Jesus walks among these bodies (these lives that matter) – seeing them – touching them – distributing the food for which they so hunger. This is the bread of life.

We must recognise that we all have power – political power, financial power, sexual power, emotional power. And we can choose how we use that power – as a selfish earthly king might exploit those whom he can look down upon as he walks upon the rooftop of his private castle. Or alternatively as Christ who cared for the wellbeing of the multitude as he walk among them and generously and compassionately fed them – alternatively as Christ who calmed the fears of his disciples by walking on the lake - out in the open toward their little boat.

We have all used people for our own purposes. And we can all choose to treat others as equal partners in the pursuit of a just and equitable and compassionate society. This is not about moralism. It is about our mutual survival. It is about the intimacy that God longs for us to experience in Christ and with each other. And so we close with the wisdom of yet another achingly beautiful collect by Janet Morley that urges us to turn from our guilt: O God, you have made us for yourself, and against your longing there is no defence. Mark us with your love, and release in us a passion for your justice in our disfigured world; that we may turn from our guilt and face you, our heart's desire, Amen.