

Weekly Reading – Monday, June 7, 2010

II Samuel 11: 26 - 12: 10, 13 - 15

The climactic moment in the David and Bathsheba story when the prophet Nathan skillfully confronts David with his own sin and failure. (The other OT choice, I Kings 21, has a similar concern with the powerful using or abusing their power to undermine law and ethics for personal gain--relevant, one might say, to the BP crisis). Nathan's strategum for pointing out David's sin is as masterful as it is calculated. He tells a story of a poor man and his lamb, then springs the trap on a self-righteous David, "Thou art the man." "Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight?" Nathan asks David. The prophet challenges the King, reminding him that his power too is derived, that he too is a contingent mortal. David's sin against the neighbor is a sin against God. David, to his credit, does not deny or seek to justify himself. "I have sinned against the Lord." He is forgiven, but his sin still has consequences, sewing the seeds of evil in his own house and bringing death to the child which David had conceived with Bathsheba. It seems somehow unfair that an innocent bystander, and a child, should suffer die for David's sin. But that's the way it is with sin, it brings suffering to innocent bystanders (again, consider the innocent animals and by-standers in the Gulf).

Galatians 2: 15 - 21

The second in a series from Paul's passionate letter to the Galatians, and a key text both for that letter and Christian faith. Paul is concerned with the "Judaizers," who are telling the Galatians that they must be circumcised and keep the law to be saved. Paul sees this as a nullification of God's grace and of the gift of Jesus Christ. Core gospel stuff, which Paul states personally and dramatically: "For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and so it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live I live by faith in the Son of God." This is the heart and center of Paul's transformation, a transformation from self-dependence to Other-dependence. For Paul the law had become a vehicle of the ego, of an essentially self-centered life, even as it appeared righteous and beyond blame. The crucifixion becomes a kind of "ego-reduction" even "ego-destruction" event. It's not about him. It's about God, about what God has done in Christ, about grace. The challenge for preachers is to take the old familiar terms of "law" and "grace," and help people understand what they mean as Paul is using them (not self-evident) and to locate their analogical meanings in our our time and place. What human systems (often religious) do we create for getting at/ controlling God and which we substitute for grace?

Luke 7: 36 - 8: 3

As is often the case with Scripture and lectionary, a theme that Paul explores in a more conceptual, if personal way, is explored through a narrative in the gospels. So Jesus is a guest at the home of good, religious man, a Pharisee, when "a woman of

the city," a sinner perhaps a prostitute, steals in and makes a scene, first weeping, then washing Jesus' feet with her tears and anointing them with ointment. Simon, the Pharisee, expects that Jesus should be offended (as he is) by this loose woman and the scene she has made. In this Simon represents conventional opinion and expected reaction. He expects Jesus to see things as he does because he is a religious leader, a "prophet." But Jesus surprises him and upsets conventional thought and expectations. We will miss the force of this text if we simply cozy up with Jesus and point the finger at Simon. We will get the force of it if we can locate ourselves with Simon the Pharisee rather than over against him. When have we been "scandalized" by the extravagance of someone who doesn't seem to care what others think? When has a known "sinner" done the right and loving thing, while the righteous have been offended. At the end of the story the focus shifts a bit when Jesus pronounces forgiveness and others ask about his authority to do so. But all three of the texts have to do with sinful humans and God's grace, and our illusion that we do not ourselves require, and indeed live by, this mercy.