

2 Samuel 11: 1-15

**Seven Deadly Sins: Lust**

February 16, 2014

The Congregational Church of Needham

Rev. Heike Werder

When Susan and I discussed this sermon series, I said to her that I would preach on any of the deadly sins except lust. When we did this sermon series about 6 years ago, I got “stuck” with lust, the juiciest of all the sins. I remember that I labored long and hard over the topic because as you know it can be tricky to talk about some particular issues from the pulpit.

Well, here we are, six years later, and another sermon on lust. I don't know how these things happen...

Let me ask you a question: What associations come to mind when you hear the word lust? Sexuality. There, the word is out. We might have other associations when it comes to the word lust – lust for power or control or stuff or prestige - but these are not the first images that come to mind – just a wild guess.

What can we say about lust? Let's start by saying something good about lust. Lust is natural, it is part of our human make-up. It is about desire, ambition, and yearnings. It is part of our createdness. It is part of God's plan and design. God implanted desire in all created beings so they would do what they are told in Genesis 1, “Be fruitful and multiply.” God created Eve because, “it is not good for anyone to be alone.” And God decided that it was good, all of it.

Desire for intimacy with one's spouse, for one's life partner is a good and holy thing. God wants good things for God's children, and that includes desire, and intimacy, and love. And research has shown that intimacy is the driver of any lasting relationship.

The trouble starts when lust/desire is uncontrolled and misdirected; when lust becomes desire for the sheer pleasure of it, without regard for any other; when lust impels us to pursue a person or object or goal that raises such feelings in us, impels us to the point of obsession in some cases. That kind of lust will change lives – and not for the better.

The best story of the Bible to tell us about the damage lust can do, is the story of King David and Bathsheba. It is the Bible's most infamous "love story."

I have asked Cici to sing a song for us, one of my very favorites. I am sure you know the song:

"Hallelujah" by Lenard Cohen . (song was sung by soloist at this point.)

I trust that you know the story and have an opinion on it. But have you ever noticed that we never get Bathsheba's side of the story? We get all kinds of stories and interpretations about the story, but we never get hers. Is it because we think we know it so well? What exactly do we think we know about David and Bathsheba?

It seems to me there are at least three versions/interpretations of this story in circulation; three different tellings of the tale of David and Bathsheba.

One version portrays them as star-crossed lovers. One tends to see it as a movie by Cecile B. DeMille, or maybe a novel by Nora Roberts: David is hunky, quiet, very good hair. Bathsheba wears too much eye shadow. She's trapped in a loveless marriage. He's the king who has everything –except the one thing he wants most. Their love will overcome every obstacle in order to be together.

Another version makes Bathsheba out as the villainous woman, the temptress, the harlot who is blamed for the King's transgression, the one so much loved by God. She made him do it, and we should actually feel sorry for David. That is the reputation that Cohen's song perpetuates (still my favorite song though):

*Your faith was strong but you needed proof*

*You saw her bathing on the roof*

*Her beauty in the moonlight overthrew you ... Poor David!*

The third version of the David and Bathsheba story – probably the more common one but the one we don't want to hear, the version we don't pass on in Sunday School in first grade yet – tells it as a tale of a powerful man committing adultery.

David has grown lazy, corrupt. So he has an affair. He would not be the last one in history; like Eisenhower and Summersby, like Clinton and Lewinsky, like JFK and...everybody, sometimes noble men do ignoble things. And, at least in this version of the story, we know that David will eventually repent –this is just a moment of weakness, a fleeting lapse of judgment.

It's Reality TV stuff. Summer blockbuster stuff: Lust. Romance. Adultery.

That is what we say this story is about. I wonder what Bathsheba would say. It is so interesting and not surprising to me that we never hear her voice, her opinion about all of this. Let's see if we can find her voice in the story.

In the world of ancient Israel, war is a lot like wearing white shoes, or drinking peach daiquiris: It's a seasonal pursuit. So just about the time that pitchers and catchers report, the armies of Israel go off to war. But this year, David does not go out with them. This year, David stays home, content to let others do the fighting and the dying. David will remain in Jerusalem.

And his schedule seems pretty light: lunch, followed by a nap, followed by Peeping Tom Time. From the roof of the palace, David sees Bathsheba bathing. The woman is "very beautiful," and the king is intrigued.

Now, I know what some of you may be thinking: Why is Bathsheba bathing in broad daylight, in full view of the king's palace? Isn't that a little...provocative? Is she perhaps trying to seduce the king? Is Bathsheba asking for it?

In the second part of verse four, the narrator tells us something important: Bathsheba is purifying herself after her period. And the narrator tells us this for a couple of reasons: so we understand that Bathsheba is at the peak of her fertility, so we realize that her husband cannot possibly be the father of the child she is about to bear. But also: this is a *mikveh*, a ritual bath. Under the Levitical code, menstruation makes a woman ritually unclean. At the conclusion of her period, she bathes in order to restore her religious purity.

So let me say this as clearly as I can: Bathsheba doesn't do something wrong; Bathsheba does something right –she fulfills a religious obligation.

But David sees her. And under his gaze, her act of devotion looks like something else. The king's interest is piqued. He asks about her, learns her name and then sends someone to *fetch* her. (That is the word my Bible translation used, the New American Standard Version.)

Did you hear that word? Fetch. That's something you do with your slippers, or an order of Pad Thai. It's not something one human being does to another. David sends some of his boys to fetch Bathsheba.

Does that sound like romance? Is that what this story is about?

Summoned by her king, Bathsheba would have no choice but to report to the palace. David sleeps with her, sends her home. We don't know what Bathsheba thinks or how Bathsheba feels about any of this. The text never tells us.

We never hear her side of the story.

There is more to this text, of course. In due time, Bathsheba discovers that she is pregnant and informs David. David panics, and engages in a series of progressively desperate attempts to cover his crime. It begins almost on a light note, David summoning Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, and plying

him with locker room banter: "Go down to your house and wash your feet" -which means: go home and sleep with your wife.

You see, David hopes that if he does, he will come to think the child as his. But that does not work. Uriah is portrayed as a good soldier to the end -a deeply decent man, in stark contrast to his increasingly depraved king. By the end of our text, David is plotting Uriah's murder.

There is a lot more to this story. But for today, let's stay with Bathsheba.

What is this story really about? What happens to her? Is this an affair...or sexual assault? Is this a romance...or rape?

To me, it seems open and shut: David rapes Bathsheba. That is what this story is about.

So why don't we remember it that way? Why did I learn something different in Sunday School, and confirmation class? Why do we so often ignore Bathsheba, or even worse, blame her for her role in these events?

But that is the thing about sexual assault: It so often hides in plain sight. It conceals itself in euphemism, in excuse, in blame. How short was her skirt? How low was her blouse? How many men had she been with before? How many drinks did she have?

That is way it goes: first the crime, then the cover-up. A conspiracy of shaming and silence. First Bathsheba is raped. Then we pretend it never happened.

That is her side of the story and we ignore it. Or, at least, we try to ignore it. But since it is right here in our Bible, we should make the effort to deal with these ancient stories of violence, and in particular violence against women, as much as we like to hear the sweet happy endings stories. If we try to "sanitize" Holy Scriptures, we have missed the point. It is our responsibility to keep on reading. That is why we are here to hear everyone's story.

Sexual violence affects every woman's life - be it rape or domestic violence or neglect and abuse of children. Hardly a day goes by when we don't hear on the news that some college student has been sexually assaulted on her way home from class, or a young woman has been murdered by a jealous boyfriend, or children get lost in the system because there is not time, no money, no people power to follow up.

Women and children are considerably less safe in the home than anywhere else. Battering is the major cause of injury to adult women. Marital rape is the most common kind of assault there is. One in three American girls before eighteen years and one in seven boys are sexually abused. It is estimated that a woman is raped in the United States every two minutes. Battering is a major cause of homelessness for women and children. At least forty percent of homeless women are women who were abused by their partners, and left. They now face violence on the street rather than battering in their home.

This is terrible and intolerable. But it is reality. Every day. One reason it persists is that we do not talk about it. Silencing is a strategy of oppression. Silence serves the status quo. If the voices of the suffering are silenced, we never have to know that anything is wrong. If the voices of the suffering are silenced, nothing ever has to change.

If justice will be done, silence must be broken. And that is why we are here. I believe God calls us into the church to learn to listen -to this story, Bathsheba's, and to every story of every survivor, of everyone oppressed and abused and shamed. We are here to break the silence. In the church, God gives sanctuary to the suffering; God makes room -enough room for everyone to be heard.

God claims us and everybody as a child of God. God told us that we are made in God's image. This means that we are accepted as we are but it also comes with responsibilities - to honor God, to honor each other, to honor ourselves. God reminds us over and over again what is holy and sacred in our lives. Our bodies are sacred; our relationships are sacred.

Each human life is sacred and deserves to be treated with respect and honor and love. Nobody gets a free pass on that: no king, no president, no husband or wife, father or mother, no stranger, no one!

I think that if we remember what is holy and sacred, those deadly sins will have very little claim on us. Amen.