

Sermon  
10 Pentecost  
July 29<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
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Postulate for the Vocational Deaconate

*I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Amen*

Over the past twenty four years, I have had the privilege to work with many survivors of interpersonal violence and I would like to draw from what I have learned from them to talk to you about what it is like for them. They have taught me so much about survival and how acts of perpetration can affect people both physically and psychologically through the remainder of their lives and I feel it is important to pass their on to you. Even though I know men who have been victims of abuse, most of the victims I have known have been women. Women primarily victimized by men in their lives. This victimization often leads to a profound sense of worthlessness that could be part of the story from Second Samuel today.

I remember a time when I was first drawn to this story because of the redemptive message of God's love in the story of David. David was seen as favored by God and through this favor he had risen to a position of power. His people loved him and he was seen as a great leader. When he used his power to have the wife of one of his generals brought to him, he failed to make right and just use of this power. In fact, once Bathsheba told him she was pregnant he continued to use his power to find ways to hide that he was the father of the child by encouraging Uriah, her husband, to sleep with her before he left for the battlefield. When Uriah did the honorable thing of staying with his men, who did not have the privilege of going home to their wives, David then had him sent to the frontlines where Uriah was then killed by the enemy.

When we read on, we find that Nathan, the prophet, confronts David about his misuse of power. David names his sin, repents, and returns to God's favor.

Wonderful! David gets to be the great king again! His worth as a man and his place as a leader is unaffected by his transgressions and he is able to continue as before. God has shown that David belongs in his place as King! This message of God's redemptive power and love is important. We need to be reminded that even when we mess up God is still there for us. But what happened to Bathsheba?

Bathsheba came from a family of military men and was married to a military man. She had been surrounded by powerful men all of her life and, given a woman's place in society at that time it would be safe to say that she had very little personal power. She may have had some status among other women, but she was held to strict rules regarding her gender including the need for the ritual bathing that she was engaged in when David saw her for the first time.

Over the years there have been attempts to paint Bathsheba as a seductress who knew exactly what she was doing when she was bathing where she could be seen by the King. There is no evidence of this in the story in Second Samuel. Over the centuries, women in many of the stories of the Bible, from Eve to Bathsheba, to Mary Magdalen have been accused of using their sexuality in ways that cause men to lose all grasp of their senses and to commit sins they would not otherwise have done. Even when there is no evidence - only the need for people to be able to place blame on a person to save the reputation of a man. In fact, while doing some reading in preparation for this talk I came across something called "Bathsheba Syndrome." This syndrome is defined as the ethical failure of men in power. Why was this not called "David Syndrome?" Or the "Bill Syndrome?" The "Harvey Syndrome?" I could go on and on. It seems like another attempt not to name the perpetrator but to continue to blame the victim. It is how we continue to protect the perpetrator from taking full responsibility.

Fortunately, David did repent. He did realize his error and we can only assume from what we are told that after the tragedy of losing this child, Bathsheba grew to love him and eventually bore more children by him. However, the story does not talk about how she may have felt during this time and the judgment she may have felt by others.

Did Bathsheba have any power to tell anyone that she had been called to David's bedroom and more than likely raped? If she had told anyone they would have accused her of lies, of trying to pin her pregnancy on David in order to gain prominence, or of trying to ruin the reputation of a good man.

Bathsheba was not only a victim of a powerful man but she was a victim of the society in which she lived. And this type of victim blaming continues today.

Many of the people I have supported over the years have spoken of how they were not believed when they told their stories of molestation and rape and abuse. They were told that the people they were speaking of could not possibly have done what they were accused of, or, if something did occur, then it must have been consensual (even if she was a child at the time). We hear stories all the time of young men who have been accused of rape that are followed by public outcry that the accuser was ruining his future. The narrative then changes so that the victim is now the one who is doing the

harm. In fact, we have recently had a situation here in NH where a confessed perpetrator who had sexually abused a child received public support from friends and colleagues while the child watched in the courtroom.

When a victim is not believed, does not receive justice, is treated as if there is something inherently wrong with them, they come to believe that it is true. When they see the abuser being supported by the community they lose faith and other victims fail to come forward for fear the same thing will happen to them. They believe that they are not worthy of a better life. They believe that bad things will continue to happen to them. They lose hope. I often hear people say that women who get into abusive relationships do so because of poor self esteem. What I know is that the circumstances of life that include childhood abuse, poverty, neglect, and marginalization because of race, ethnicity, gender identity, and status often create the poor self esteem that leads to vulnerability. We are not born with poor self esteem. It is something that is created in a person by the events in one's life that appear to occur because of who someone is. It creates an internal shame based on who we are. Bathsheba's shame came from being a woman in a society where she was powerless to the lust of a powerful man. This continues in the present and happens to women, men, and, to children. Many of us have been left feeling that that was something inherently wrong with us instead of being told that we did not deserve what happened. Victims are left feeling that the career and future of the abuser is more important than their future. Victims continue to be re-traumatized by the gossip, the judgment, the looks, and they retreat or are pushed to live on the margins instead of in the midst of society.

Here, however, is why I love Jesus so much. Jesus doesn't care. Jesus looks to lift everyone up from the belief that they are not worthy. When Jesus is speaking to the crowds I do not picture him standing on a rock above everyone like we see in paintings. I imagine him walking amongst the group and making sure that everyone is included. He doesn't stand at a pulpit above everyone to show that he is closer to God than everyone else. Instead he moves among the people, making sure that no one is left on the margins.

As he is walking along the Sea of Galilee he recognizes that the people need to be fed physically in addition to spiritually. He does not ask the Apostles to go out and check their status or determine if they are worthy. In fact, when I picture this scene in my mind I imagine that Jesus has somehow come to know each person following him and has especially chosen to engage with those persons on the margin. You know the ones I am talking about. The people who are straggling along behind not sure if Jesus' message is meant for them but want to be near him. The people who are afraid that others will point fingers and tell others of their failings and/or tell stories that have been built upon people's assumptions and need to fill in blanks.

Jesus, however, knows what is in our hearts and no matter what story has been written in our minds and in the minds of others, he finds us worthy. We are worthy of receiving the same as the persons who feel so strongly about their place that they proudly strut near Jesus at the front of the line. As Jesus moves to engage everyone from the margins, he is encouraging the ones who have the esteem that comes with living a life of privilege to see that he is moving to bring the margins to the center to be enclosed in his love and grace. To see that there is no division among his people. The miracle is not that Jesus was able to feed all the people in the crowd, it was that everyone got something to eat. They didn't have to count heads and see who shouldn't be there. There wasn't a sign up list to make sure that there wasn't too much of one thing and not enough of another. The miracle was that everyone was so full of the love that Jesus had been preaching that there was no fear of lack and no fear of the stranger. Everyone was seen as equally worthy of a meal. And those who had the forethought to bring food, the ones with a loaf of bread or a dried fish in their pocket, the mothers with little snacks for their children, they pulled together their resources and made sure everyone was fed. No one went away hungry because for that afternoon there was no judgment, only the love and the sharing of a good meal with friends in Christ on the shore of a lake. A church picnic. A place where no one was asked if they belonged. Since they were human beings it was assumed that they were worthy of being fed (and I suspect there were a few dogs and cats in the crowd that got fed as well).

And this is truly the message that I want to pass along to you today – so many of us have something in our past that has created a shame that makes it difficult to engage, to come to the picnic, to move from the back of the room to the front, - it could be that fear of being found unworthy because of some transgression that was committed against us in our past and that transgression may have laid the groundwork for a life of bad choices and more harm. But Jesus feeds us all regardless. Jesus's love is for each and every one of us. There is a place at the table for all who are hungry and those of us who have found our place at the table are tasked with making sure that our judgments and assumptions do not keep someone from finding their seat. If we are truly reclaiming Jesus in this world and engaging in what our PB Michael Curry calls the Episcopal Brand of the Jesus movement, then we know that we are asked not only to share a meal but to take this message outside of the church walls and away from the table. Jesus encourages us to open our arms and share, because with Jesus we know that through his love in us, there will always be enough. Amen.