

Rebecca Ballard
July 26, 2009

More Than Conquerors?

In his volume *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians*, twentieth century German Theologian Helmut Thielicke instructs students of theology to stay out of the pulpit during their period of study, lest they burden their congregations with whatever bit of reading they have just completed and with which they and they alone are, for the moment, fascinated. Some of you are aware that I have completed the first year of a masters program in Theological Studies, and I have two more years of study ahead of me and yet, here I am, in the pulpit before you this morning. And I've selected the Old Testament lectionary passage from which to speak to you today and I actually enjoyed preparing this message. Yes, perhaps I should I have paid Mr. Thielicke a little more heed. So, with Mr. Thielicke's blessing, I give you leave to take issue with anything I say to you this morning. But I pray that, by grace, God might yet speak to you this day, in spite of my youth and inexperience. *Let us pray.*

Now, before you write off my sermon as irrelevant to you because, frankly, you don't cheat, thank you very much, let me disavow you of the notion that this passage is about sex. That is not to say that the passage does not *involve* sex. Clearly, a person is conceived and it is certainly not immaculate. But the passage is actually about much more than broken marriage vows.

Not that our society couldn't use a good refresher course on what those vows actually require of them; that their vows require anything of them might be news to some. Others may have written their own vows such that they avoid the need for fidelity and personal responsibility altogether. A recent *Time* Magazine cover story explores the

question “What does America need to get over its commitment issues?” Not surprisingly, the likes of Mark Sanford, John Ensign, John Edwards, and our now infamous former governor are all referenced. Perhaps the only surprise is that the author’s list of politicians is so short. But public figures are not the only subject of the essay. The author cites the research of sociologist Andrew Cherlin who observes that American families, when compared with families in other countries, have distinguished themselves with “frequent marriage, frequent divorce” and a high number of “short-term co-habiting relationships.” Cherlin cautions that these factors

create a great turbulence in American family life, a family flux, a coming and going of partners on a scale seen nowhere else. There are more partners in the personal lives of Americans than in the lives of people of any other Western country.

Big deal, right? This is the 21st century, after all. Essayist Caitlin Flanagan argues, however, that

There is no other single force causing as much measurable hardship and human misery in this country as the collapse of marriage.

Perhaps a bit overstated, but she goes on to say that

It hurts children, it reduces mothers’ financial security, and it has landed with particular devastation on those who can bear it least: the nation’s underclass.

In fact, on a visit to True Bethel Baptist on East Ferry, where the underclass is far from underrepresented, some of the senior highs and I heard a message from this passage just a few months ago. Rev. Darius Pridgen instructed his congregation not to follow David’s lead. “If you have to go in through the back door, in the middle of the afternoon, you probably shouldn’t be there.” (My apologies to Rev. Pridgen – I fear I lack both his style and charisma). At one point, the pastor had us turn to our neighbor and say, “I could have used this message 10 years ago.” I turned to one of the Westminster teens sitting next to

me and smugly declared that I didn't need this message 10 years ago. How old was I? 16? With a twinkle in her eye she replied, "I think you could have used this 10 years ago."

But, thank God, that's not what we're talking about today. As Leonard Michaels observes, "Adultery is not about sex or romance. Ultimately, it is about how little we mean to one another." And even less so in ancient Israel. We are accustomed to referring to this story as, "David and Bathsheba," but, quite frankly, a more apt title is probably "David and Uriah." David and who, you might ask? You remember Uriah, don't you? The loyal soldier who sleeps with the servants when he is home from battle and delivers the orders that will surely send him to his death. "David and Uriah" or at the very least, "David and the wife of Uriah." In the text Phil read this morning, Bathsheba's name is used only once. She is called, "the woman," "the wife of Uriah," "the daughter of Eliam." She is primarily identified by her relationships to men. Of concern is that Uriah's property has been violated and exploited.

This becomes clear in the next chapter, when the prophet Nathan confronts David through a parable:

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.

The analogy is not perfect, but clearly in the parable, it is the poor man and his meager property that are exploited by the rich, who had plenty to spare. In the message from the Lord that follows, Nathan rebukes David who has "struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword" and "took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be" his own.

In this morning's passage, it is Uriah's honor and loyalty that are contrasted with David's utter lack thereof. When David sends for Uriah to come home from battle, he instructs him to go home and "Wash [his] feet." Now David wasn't telling Uriah his feet were dirty. The soldier would have understood the euphemism. The king was telling him to go sleep with his wife. And we can see in verse 11 that Uriah did understand. When the king, desperate to cover up his own indiscretion, asks Uriah why he didn't go home, he replies,

The ark and Israel and Judah remain in booths; and my lord Joab and the servants of my lord are camping in the open field; shall I then go to my house, to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife? As you live, and as your soul lives, I will not do such a thing.

Now if David had any sense at the time, he would be feeling pretty sheepish right about now. Not only had he done with this man's wife what Uriah himself refused to do with her while on leave from the battlefield, there is no good explanation for why David was not at battle himself. The passage opens with, "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...But David *remained* at Jerusalem." Now, whatever your feelings are about war, *this* was the time when kings "go out" to battle, not the time when they stay in Jerusalem or Washington and send other people's sons and daughters out to die. Back in 1 Samuel, the elders of Israel had called for a king who would lead them into battle, go out and fight with them, not merely send them out. But David, that same boy who, armed with only a sling, some pebbles and a lot of faith in his God, had faced a giant, had become the king who stayed home and let other men fight his battles. It seems our David has become too important to fight with his people, while Uriah, in solidarity with his fellows, sleeps

outside with the king's servants. David even gets him drunk, and still Uriah refuses to go home to his wife.

So the king, home with nothing better to do, uses royal power abusively to satisfy his own personal desires. And isn't that what we kind of expect of our leaders? Yes, we long for someone of good moral character, with a clean record, who will represent our best interest and not cave under the seduction of special interests. But do we actually expect to ever find someone like that? Are we really surprised when we hear that they've embezzled funds, lied under oath (not to mention lying on the campaign trail), used their position to have an ex-brother-in-law fired (however horrible he was as a husband), forgot to report that they had their houses completely redone as a favor from a special interest?

Indeed, we rarely expect more of our leaders. Perhaps we can't. David, after all, was the prototypical king for Israel. This is what they were looking for in a Messiah: a king who, despite his faults, would again make them a great nation.

But that is far from what they found. And some were none too pleased with the disappointment. In the gospel passage for today, (that we did not read), we hear again of Jesus feeding the masses, multiplying for thousands the meager lunch of bread and fish, meant to feed only a boy. After the meal, with twelve baskets of food to spare, the crowd tries to take Jesus and make him king. So he goes with them, right? This was the moment he was waiting for. This is why he came. This is what the prophet meant by king of kings and lord of lords, right? He goes and makes a great nation-state of Israel.

Instead, the gospel-writer tells us that, “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.”

This is a very different sort of withdrawal than we saw with David. David stayed back from his duties and got himself into trouble. Jesus withdrew, it seems, to stay out of it. He didn’t come to raise up a great army and conquer the world. No, Jesus came to lead in quite a different way.

We think of another meal, and another foot-washing, only this time, foot-washing isn’t a euphemism. Jesus, king of kings, washed the dirty, nasty, smelly feet of a handful of fishermen, tax collectors, and a man he knew full-well was about to betray him and send him to a criminal’s death. Jesus humbles himself even before his enemy. He puts on the garments, not of a king, but of a servant, gets down on his knees and does the work of a servant, washing the feet of his students. And this is not just a kind gesture from Jesus; He is leading by example. He says to them,

Do you understand what I have done to you? You address me as “Teacher” and “Master” and rightly so. That is what I am. So if I, the Master and Teacher, washed your feet, you must now wash each other’s feet. I’ve laid down a pattern for you. What I’ve done, you do. I’m only pointing out the obvious. A servant is not ranked above his master; an employee doesn’t give orders to the employer. If you understand what I’m telling you, act like it – and live a blessed life.

The last time I read this passage, I was standing in the community room at the congregational church in East Sumner, ME with the teens, in front of two basins of water and a stack of towels. I invited them to come in pairs to either wash one another’s feet or hands, as Jesus had demonstrated for us. I told them they didn’t have to come, but they did. Now the parking lot at the Sumner church is pretty much a sand box. And it was wet pretty much the whole week. Our feet were not clean. But they came. And they washed

one another's hands or feet. After a week of serving alongside one another, they served each other. (One of the boys came up to me at the end and told me he'd been wanting his brother to wash his feet all week!)

This is what it means to be Christians, to be "Christ-like," to serve one another in humility and love. PCUSA has designated this Sunday as Metropolitan and Urban Ministry Sunday. We are, of course, a metropolitan church and we are involved in many important urban ministries. We tutor refugee children, we build homes for low income families, we knit blankets for those in need, we fill bags of groceries for the hungry, we share beautiful music with our community and we help make dreams of owning a small business a reality for would-be entrepreneurs on the West Side. (Let me recommend to you the Puerto-Rican and Mexican cooking at Carmen's Kitchen, a welcome product of our small business-mentorship program!). And this is important work, meeting real needs in our little rustbelt city.

But even as we recognize the mission projects we are spearheading, let us also take this time to remember that urban ministry - well, ministry in general, really - is not about being the biggest kid on the block, or the richest, or the most beautiful (though I am grateful for the art and architecture we are privileged to enjoy in this house of worship week after week). Ministry in the name of Christ is about setting aside our self-importance and pretense, and humbling ourselves before one another. In the wisdom of Bono and U2, "If you want to touch the sky, then learn how to kneel. On your knees, boy." If the Messiah is not too good to humble himself before his disciples, who are we to think ourselves too important to get down on our knees and serve one another?

So if I, the Master and Teacher, washed your feet, you must now wash each other's feet. I've laid down a pattern for you. What I've done, you do...If you understand what I'm telling you, act like it – and live a blessed life.