

*O Wad Some Pow'r the Giftie Gie Us!*  
**Rev. James Van Schaick**  
**Pound Ridge Community Church**  
**Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost**  
**August 5, 2018**  
**2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a**  
**Ephesians 4:1-16**

In a former life in the corporate world, I had the opportunity to lead several organizations. One in particular, an internal audit group, required that its members be adept at giving presentations. They needed to be skilled because our presentations would often be to senior-level executives, and involve findings that might not be well received. We had to be clear, and confident.

Every time we had the chance for some internal training sessions, I made sure to include something to help people improve presentation skills. This always involved videotaping the members of the team speaking in front of the group, and evaluating individual presentations. Sometimes, people would have been given a topic in advance to prepare. Sometimes, they would draw topics out of a hat, and have to give a two-minute talk on whatever subject was selected.

However we did it, one thing was universally true. People hated it. It's not an easy thing to do something, then see what you looked like doing it. Even people who were experienced in speaking and who felt comfortable doing it hated looking at themselves on tape. And I think the reason is that we all carefully cultivate positive self-images. We may be unaware of our shortcomings, or may even lie to ourselves about them. But the videotape doesn't lie. And the inescapable conclusion once you've watched it is that there are things you need to change. I always felt that I should participate, too, and even I hated it.

It can be hard to see yourself as others see you. Of course, something else was always true as well. It's the reason I always insisted that they do it. It works. People improved if they could drop their defenses and look at themselves as objectively as possible. They grew professionally. They got better at it.

Of course, I didn't come up with the idea. Videotaping has been used for things like sports training since the invention of the video tape. Back when I thought I could play golf, I had a series of lessons that involved analyzing my swing on videotape. When I saw the mess of disjointed movement that was my golf swing, I couldn't believe it was me. From the inside, my golf stroke felt like Tiger Woods in his prime. From the outside, it was a completely different story. But I managed to accept reality. And it did help me change things that improved my game.

When we are able to see ourselves from the outside, two things are almost universally true. It's embarrassing and painful. But if we are able to engage the

truth that is right in front of our eyes, and do something about it, we grow. We get better at whatever it is.

We see the same kind of transformation taking place in the midst of the saga of adultery and murder we've been reading – the story we began last week of King David and Bathsheba. We heard about how David sees Bathsheba from the roof of his palace, and summons her to his bed. When she becomes pregnant, David first tries a cover-up, but then decides to arrange for her husband, Uriah, to die in battle.

It is important to remember that David was once a mere shepherd, picked from obscurity by God to become one of the great heroes of the Jewish tradition. He was handsome, the Bible tells us, ruddy with stunning eyes. He was a brave and fearless fighter, who developed into an accomplished military strategist, and an effective political leader. Eventually he became a keen urban developer. Jerusalem was his idea and it was he who made it the capital of a unified Jewish kingdom. He was a poet, artist, athlete, musician and composer. He was God's anointed one.

The problem seems to be that he knew it. And, as we might say in a modern idiom, David begins to believe his own press. He had become invincible in his own mind, a success too large to fail. He thought that everything he accomplished was due to his own greatness, and he deserved all the rewards. He was prosperous and comfortable, but he wanted even more. The beautiful Bathsheba was just something he had coming to him, no matter what treachery and deceit it took to get her.

Today, you heard how King David is confronted by the prophet, Nathan, who shares a story. It's about a very rich man, with vast flocks, and a poor man who had just one small lamb. The lamb was as precious to him as a child. When the rich man has visitors, he decides not to use an animal of his own to feed his guests. He takes the poor man's lamb and has it killed and prepared for their meal. David cried out in anger when he heard this. Why, such a man deserved to die for what he did! In his own arrogance and self-centeredness he couldn't even see himself in the picture that Nathan was showing him. "It's you!" Nathan finally shouts in exasperation, "You, King, are that man!"

To David's credit, he recognizes himself in the cold light of reality. And he is cut to the core by the realization of how hideously he had acted. He understands his own culpability and admits, "I have sinned before God." This look at himself from the outside would change David. He subsequently would acknowledge the simple truth that he was not in control and that God was the source of his being, his success, and everything he had. In one of the best-known Psalms attributed to him, David would write to God the beautiful and familiar words of Psalm 51: "I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me...You desire truth in my

inward being, you teach me wisdom in my deepest secrets...Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” (Excerpts from Psalm 51)

When we are able to see the reality of our selves; in those rare and precious times of self-insight when we can drop the need to protect our ego and self-image and watch the videotape, two things are always true. First, it hurts. This was expressed beautifully by a pastor named Patrick Willson when he said, “The most troubling truth we have to face is the truth that echoes in the deep chasm between the person we are and that person we should like to be.”<sup>1</sup>

Now, I need to digress a second to underscore an important point. This isn't about beating ourselves up because we all fall short of who we want to be, in ways we often don't (or won't) see for ourselves. The point of this isn't to make ourselves feel bad because we often aren't the people we want others to think we are. It's not about wallowing in a sense of our own desperate imperfection. Rather, this story needs to be seen in the context of one of the cornerstones of our faith – that the God we worship is a God of grace. Our reading is put in that context at the very end. I hope you heard it. When a distraught King David moans, “I have sinned before God,” Nathan replies without hesitation: “God has taken away your sin.” When we stand before God and own who we are and what we've done, we are already forgiven.

And remember, too, that when we accept the truth about ourselves, a second thing happens. We grow. We become better, just as David did. That's what God really wants. You see, God used Nathan to give King David a gift – the gift of self-awareness. At least, that's what the poet-laureate of Scotland, Robert Burns, would call it in 1786. The title of the sermon today is not a misprint – it's actually the first line of one of Robert Burns' most famous quotes, in the original Scottish. I won't even try to read it in Scottish. Even though it doesn't rhyme in modern English, you'll still recognize it: “And would some Power give us the gift/ To see ourselves as others see us!”

This is actually two lines from a much longer poem. And it has a wonderful story behind it. The poem is entitled “To a Louse” – literally, to a louse, the tiny parasitic bug that every child has brought home in their hair from either elementary school or sleep-away camp. The poem was inspired when Burns was sitting in church behind a very pious and self-important woman. And he noticed that she had a louse crawling around on her bonnet. The poem is about how she sees herself, and how others – who know something about her that she doesn't – are seeing her. Here, in English, is the whole verse:

And would some Power give us the gift  
To see ourselves as others see us!  
It would from many a blunder free us,  
And foolish notion:

What airs in dress and gait would leave us,  
And even devotion!

What Burns is saying is that “seeing ourselves as others see us” – as we really are – is a gift because it brings with it a kind of freedom. It frees us from our “airs” – our pretenses. It relieves us of our worry about how we appear, and from the fear that others – or we ourselves – will find out that we’re really not fabulous. Most importantly, Burns says it frees us from “airs in devotion.” That’s a very, very dated way of speaking, but here’s what I think he means. When we are blessed to see ourselves in a truthful light, our devotions – the things we are committed to – can change. We can stop pursuing things we’ve always thought were important, but weren’t. We need no longer run after what we have always believed gave meaning to our lives, but didn’t, really. We can stop being devoted to the never-ending demands of our own egos. The gift is that we are freed to grow as people – to grow as God’s people.

Openness to “seeing ourselves as others see us” liberates us to live as Paul describes today in his letter to the Ephesians. “We must no longer be children,” he said, “tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind that comes by deceitful scheming and the tricks people play to deliberately mislead others. Instead, by speaking the truth with love, let’s grow up in every way into the likeness of Christ, in whom, joined and knitted together, the body’s growth is promoted and builds itself up in love.” (Ephesians 4:14-16)

Our readings today invite us into some serious work – to grow up! That means being open to seeing ourselves as we really are. It will be harder for some than others, but it will be a challenge for all. There is one obvious question. Where can we turn to find the courage and the wisdom to do that? I don’t have the definitive answer. I will say that if you’re ready to honestly engage the question, you’ve come to the right place. Maybe we can make a start with these words of Jesus from the gospel of Matthew: “Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.” (Matthew 7:7)

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<sup>i</sup> Patrick J. Willson. “Blessed Are the Troubled” in *Lectionary Homiletics*, vol. XXIII, no. 5, p. 8.