

Sermon on Luke 7:36-8:3; 2 Samuel 11:26-12:10; 12:13-15  
Third Sunday after Pentecost, June 13, 2010  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

In an era when not much on television is worth watching, there's one show that Kim and I seldom miss – and it's not *American Idol*! The program we watch whenever we can is *The Good Wife*; a weekly lawyer show that features not just your usual courtroom drama, but also “intrigue and sexual politics inside the law firm”. If you've never seen it, the show is based on a woman whose husband was a district attorney in Chicago who had to resign in disgrace due to sexual infidelity, and was jailed on corruption charges (now how far-fetched is that – since when would something like that ever happen to a Chicago politician?!). To make ends meet, the “good wife” joins a prestigious Chicago law firm and every week we see her steady rise in standing in the firm, with a changing relationship with her formerly philandering husband. Now she has the job and the power in the family, and so the “fun” begins. The show touches on many of today's ethical dilemmas, such as “downsizing” in the law firm, and where the “law” and “justice” meet (and where they seem to be in opposition to each other). If you're tired of *reality tv* and mindless comedies, this is a good show to watch.

Two of our scripture lessons today have their basis in how women and men were treated differently in ancient culture, with men having license to “do what they wanted” and women suffered the consequences – a double standard that we are certainly not rid of today! In the Old Testament lesson Nathan the prophet calls King David to account (at considerable personal risk), and in the gospel Jesus points out the hypocrisy of self-righteous men in their disdain for a “sinful woman.” Special warning: these stories may be rated *Parental Guidance*.

We've all heard of King David. He was a hero as a young man, killing the Philistine giant Goliath with a single stone from his slingshot. He later became the King of Israel, the greatest king they ever had, known for his faithfulness to God and his writing and singing of psalms. But later in life, he let his power as king prevent him from knowing right from wrong. As we all know, ancient kings enjoyed the power to do most anything they wished. So, one day King David looked out from his window onto the roof of the next home, when he saw the wife of one of his generals take her bath. Her name was Bathsheba. She was very beautiful, and King David desired her. So he schemed to have her husband, Uriah, killed in the front line of battle. Then, after an appropriate period of mourning, David took her into his house, and she became his wife, and had a son. But scripture says that what David had done “displeased the Lord.”

So God sent Nathan the prophet to King David to confront him (which may have made Nathan a bit nervous, to confront a king). So he decided to tell the king a story: about a rich man who had many flocks of sheep, and a poor man who had

only one little lamb. One day the rich man had a guest, but instead of using one of his own lambs to cook for dinner, he took the poor man's only lamb, and served it to his guest. King David was livid when he heard this story. He said the man who did such a thing deserved to die, because he had no pity. Nathan said to King David, "*You are that man.*" Nathan reminded David of all that the Lord had given him as King, and what he had done to Uriah to take his wife, Bathsheba into his home. Then David was ashamed, and admitted that "He had sinned against the Lord." But there were further consequences. Tragically, the child became ill, and died, which the ancient writers understood to be God's judgment against David. Whether it was God's will or not, the fact of the matter is that the tragedy didn't end with Uriah's death; it went on to include the death of David and Bathsheba's child. So even though David had thought that he had the power to do whatever he wanted, including taking another man's wife as his own, the truth is that such an abuse of power had its own tragic consequences. Even the famous King David was capable of sin, and was forced to confess his own guilt to Nathan. Not unlike modern day powerful politicians, even presidents, who are forced to confess their own sins and failures when confronted with the truth. I think this is one of the most powerful stories in all scripture, though one of the least known.

A second story: one of the things Jesus commonly did was eat with Pharisees and other religious leaders in the towns where he preached. When he did, he brought his disciples with him, and all those who traveled with him. It was common courtesy for town leaders to invite an important guest, along with their fellow travelers. So, inevitably, there were many "outcasts and sinners" at the table with Jesus, as those were his common traveling companions – for he accepted them as human beings, taught them along with everyone else, included them in his entourage. This often mystified his hosts and other dinner guests, who were more used to only "acceptable and other important people" at their tables.

At the dinner described today, the meal was interrupted by a woman who came to see Jesus, weeping, and washed Jesus' feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair. She even kissed his feet and anointed them with expensive ointment, out of gratitude and love. The other guests were incredulous, saying to themselves, "*if Jesus were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman this was.*" For they saw her as a woman of the streets, likely a prostitute, whom they considered just a sinner, who was unclean and should be avoided. But Jesus saw her as a human being, a beloved child of God, whose sins he had forgiven and already forgotten. He saw the love, and the gratitude, that she had for him because he had forgiven and accepted her. He contrasted the love she had shown him with the failure of his host to provide common hospitality. His host had not offered him water to wash his feet, or given him any oil for his head. This woman whom his hosts disdained had so much more love for him, because she had been forgiven for so much. So Jesus said to her, "Your sins are forgiven....Your faith has saved you; go in peace." The "righteousness" of his male hosts could not "save" them, but the

faith and love of the woman had already saved her. So Jesus went, on through the other village and cities of Galilee, proclaiming the good news of the love, forgiveness and mercy of God. And many who heard this good news, who were forgiven their sins and healed from their diseases, followed him all the way to Jerusalem. These women, included Mary Magdalene and Joanna, who helped support Jesus' ministry, were the same ones who first came to Jesus' tomb on Easter morning, to see that he had risen. This shows the great power of God's forgiving love to raise up even those who may seem to have fallen so far.

So what do these ancient stories have to do with us? Today we have come to praise God for this love, this forgiveness and mercy that has reached down through the centuries even to us – to you and me! You and I have come to be reminded by the words of Paul in Galatians, that “we have been justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.” We have come to listen, and learn how to live as forgiven sinners saved by God's grace.

Over the past two weeks we have witnessed countless graduation ceremonies, which are times when speakers remind graduates of lessons learned as they go through life. Today there are life lessons in scripture for our high school and college graduates, students, and all of us “life-long learners”. From King David's tragic mistake, we learn not to let success or power go to our heads, so that we forget about ethical standard and the difference between right and wrong. We also learn from Nathan the prophet that sometimes it is the role of the Church, and people of faith, to confront even our most popular leaders when power is abused.

From the woman in the gospel story we see how it is good to show gratitude for grace and mercy, and there are many ways to express it. From Jesus we learn how crucial it is to value every human being, and not to condemn anyone forever for what or who we think they are, or what they have done. Showing forgiveness and mercy is our calling as Christians, not condemnation, contempt for others, or self-righteousness.

When you and I are invited to follow Jesus, it includes imitating Christ's compassion for the poor, for the outcast, and all those condemned by others – even when it is not popular. This includes compassion for immigrants, refugees, and the “undocumented” (whom many call “illegal aliens”) – for we are all human beings and children of God. We are also taught by our Lord never to abuse our power or take advantage of others – even when it seems tempting. For showing mercy and grace is how we follow our Master, and share the good news of God with others. So today we ask for wisdom, guidance, and the power of the Spirit to follow our Lord and do God's will throughout our lives. Thanks be to God. Amen.