

TURNING POINTS

Sermon Presented to St. Paul's Church
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Turning points in people's lives are sometimes positive and sometimes negative.

Perhaps a positive moment would be when someone wins an Olympic Gold Medal, rescues someone from drowning, or writes the great American novel. Negative turning points are likewise defining. President Bill Clinton's scandal with Monica Lewinsky in 1998 forever tarnished his presidency. The Bernie Madoff Ponzi scheme will forever brand him as the greatest swindler of the century. Of course, there was the infamous Watergate scandal in the 1970's that caused Richard Nixon to resign from the Presidency.

Last Friday we witnessed a turning point in the life of former Governor Don Siegelman. I have mixed emotions about Don. I have known him since the early 1980's when he appointed me as a Special Assistant Attorney General to do condemnation work for the State Highway Department in Baldwin County. He did some good work for the State of Alabama during his public political career. However, he will most likely be remembered only for his bribery conviction. Though this has been a protracted event, his resentencing in his bribery conviction was significant. After years of steadfastly professing his innocence, of blaming the Republican Party of waging a conspiracy to have him removed from office, Don Siegelman took the stand on Friday and publically apologized for his actions. He apologized to his family and to the people of the State of Alabama. He acknowledged his mistakes and was resentenced to a term in prison. While some may conclude Don's conviction was the turning point/defining moment in his life, I think otherwise. For me, his turning point then was his confession of guilt last Friday. That was Don's defining moment.

Like the more recent scandals in history, the Bible is full of characters that had significant turning points in their lives. We know the stories of Abraham, Jacob and Moses from the Old Testament and about Peter and Paul from the New Testament. Though we look at them as pillars of the faith, they each trudged through life in their own feet of clay and made many mistakes along the way. Yet each had their own turning point that brought them back into the good graces of God.

This brings me to King David, another character from the Hebrew Scriptures. King David had a major turning point during his reign. So, what exactly was his turning point during his monarchy? For some people it was his act of adultery with Bathsheba. Others may point to his conspiracy to have her husband Uriah murdered. However, it is my contention that his true turning point was his repentance.

In today's text from Second Samuel, David is picking up the pieces of his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah. Uriah was killed on David's orders. After Bathsheba conducts a proper mourning for her husband, David sends for her once again, but this time to take her for his wife.

Notice that David had no intention of marrying her until he found out she was pregnant. We know this because he tried to cover up his affair by having her husband killed. Now the cover up continues by his marrying the woman who is bearing his child. Their relationship wasn't predicated on love as much as it was an act based on lust and power. David exercised his royal prerogative and summoned Bathsheba into his home.

None of David's actions goes unnoticed. Chapter 11 ends with a clear statement from God, "But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord." So God sends Nathan to confront

David with his sin. This isn't an easy task because you take your life in your own hands by accusing a king of misbehavior. David has already demonstrated he could be ruthless by his actions toward Uriah. Consequently, Nathan doesn't directly confront David with his sin. Instead, he tells a story which elicits the righteous indignation of David.

In many ways, Nathan's approach was reminiscent of the old Perry Mason character from television. Perry is cross examining a witness and as the testimony unfolds, a person from the audience inexplicably stands up and confesses to the crime. In Nathan's case, he simply begins his encounter with David by telling him a story.

He tells of two men in a city. One was rich and the other poor. The rich man has large flocks and herds, while the poor man has only one prized ewe lamb. The poor man loves this lamb so much that he treats it like his child. The lamb ate, drank, and slept with him. When a guest arrives at the rich man's house, he was hesitant to kill one of his own animals. Instead, the rich man takes the poor man's prized lamb and feeds it to his guest.

It's a story of greed and abuse of power. It's a story that easily evokes shock and contempt toward the rich man for his heartless act. David's responds accordingly and expresses his anger and shock. He proclaims, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity." (2 Samuel 12:5, NRSV).

Nathan brings the matter to its dramatic conclusion by proclaiming. "You are the man!" (v. 12:7). Like the rich man, David is the one who had so much yet took the possession of one who had so little. David is the one who exploited Uriah and is guilty of the injustice that David now condemns.

The Prophet Nathan then announces the judgment of God. The message from God begins by recounting all that God has done for David: “I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul; I gave you your master’s house, and your master’s wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more.” (v. 12:8). In other words, God was saying to David, “If you wanted anything in this life I would have gladly given it to you. There was no reason to take Uriah’s wife and later his life.”

Through Nathan, God makes an accusation regarding David’s offenses: “Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites.” (v. 12:9).

Notice that David’s actions are seen here as despising the word of the Lord. From God’s perspective, David’s sin was also against God and not just against Uriah and Bathsheba.

Interestingly, what God views as the sin of David isn’t the adultery. In God’s view, it was the murder that mattered, and God views it as if David had killed Uriah with his own sword.

In verse 13, we come at last to David’s response. He does not turn on Nathan or reject Nathan’s harsh words. He offers no alibis or explanations. He does not attempt to justify himself. He says simply, ‘I have sinned against the Lord.’ His confession is simple and direct.

In this place where we might least expect it, we see the true measure of David’s character. He does not turn away from the troubling truth about himself. Kings fear and politicians fear, and we all fear that moment of self-discovery which troubles us with the truth about ourselves. It costs something to come to terms with who you truly are. Self-knowledge is

painful. It hurts to give up our most cherished illusions about ourselves. We don't like to hear someone say "you are the one!" We feel the force of David's character as he acknowledges his guilt and says, "I have sinned against God." Rather than shift blame or trot out excuses for his conduct, David has the courage, the honesty, the wherewithal, to agree, "I am the one." He is the one, and we see the true dimensions of his character as he accepts responsibility for his actions.

Sometimes the most troubling truth we have to face is the truth that echoes in that space between the person we are and that person we should like to be. It is painful to be stretched across the space that separates reality from our greatest hope.

When we allow ourselves to be troubled by that distance between who we are and who we would like to be, we find ourselves on the way back to God. No matter how many times we turn our backs on God, He always longs for reconciliation. That's why we should always remember that sin is "falling short" of God's hope for us. This should remind us that no matter what, God is for us and on our side. Even when God deplores our actions and is disappointed by our choices, He stands by us. By the same token, God stands against David because God is ultimately for David. Remember, David and God had a special relationship. David is the one after God's own heart and that does not change in this story. That's because David speaks the truth he knows about himself: "I am the one...I have sinned against God." Because David can confront his sins, his story goes on and David is able to grow.

Sadly, our passage this morning concludes with David's confession and repentance. For whatever reason, the editors of our lectionary left out God's grace. I include it here because it is too good to be omitted. Nathan's response in the very next verse is, "Now the Lord has put away

your sin; you shall not die.” In spite of everything David has done, his sincere confession of faith brings him back into God’s good graces.

So after reviewing this story again, I ask you, “What was David’s one turning point?” Some will say it was his adultery. Some would venture that it was the murder of Uriah. But God seemed to think it was his repentance. I do too. That’s why I also believe that was Don Siegelman’s turning point as well.

David records the power of confession and repentance in the 51st Psalm. Listen as David shows us how to approach God daily with penitent hearts:

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment . . . Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.”

David’s turning point was not his great failure, it was his great confession and repentance. The same can be true for us. Many of us struggle with our failures and cannot seem to get past them. If you struggle with your failures, David’s example shows us how to have our own “turning point.” This can happen when we too proclaim, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.”

AMEN