St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church

Proper 12

2 Samuel 11:1-15

Psalm 14

Ephesians 3: 14-21

John 6: 1-21

To Give or to Take

Who we are perceived to be is defined by the choices we make in life. We can look back and see the choices we have made and their impact on our lives and how our lives have somehow shifted toward or away from the path we ever expected to follow. Sometimes, looking backward, we can view with satisfaction, the good choices we made through the years. A decision to take on. A decision to give away. A decision to risk all. A decision to risk nothing. A decision to hold the line, no matter the pain. A decision to throw all one has accomplished away, in order to choose what one wants, no matter the pain to someone else.

We are presented with all these choices and decisions by today’s scriptures. The choices, made for good or for ill, the give and take in life stories and the impact that the choices made therein, not only in individual histories and legacies, but in the history and the legacies left behind, just as those left behind thousands of years ago.

After an life of continual accomplishment and a divine direction given by God, David astonishes us with such a rash act of self-indulgence and self-gratification, that our view of David becomes muddied and confused. Here is the humble shepherd boy, singled out by God for greatness who goes on to kill Goliath with a simple sling shot, is protected from Saul’s powerful and vindictive violence, is married into royalty, reigns over Judah and Israel, and dances before the ark of God as he comes home to Jerusalem, bringing with him a magnificent legacy of accomplishment and celebration.

What more could a simple shepherd boy want?

Or rather, what would create such desire to choose unwisely, in one who had been given the opportunity to choose only for the best?

There seems to be one word that immediately springs to mind: Power. Power and the choices one makes in order to hold on to it, or the choices one makes in order to prove it, or to test it, or the choices one makes in order to test all those who might try to judge it, should they dare. Whether pauper or prince, lowly or high in station, the choice is decidedly human at any class level or socio-economic or political status.

And the higher ones climbs in life, the deeper and harder one falls. Who knows why, in history and in our own times, we see the powerful, or those who have spent a lifetime reaching for the top and who seem untouchable, unreachable, beyond the grasp of normal boundaries and moral expectations, choose a course of action, whose reason is almost impossible to understand by any normal human being, that will cause that person to fall from grace with devastating and irretrievable speed and disastrous consequences. The legacy so firmly in place is torn and tattered, broken and changed forever, never to be what it once was or could be again.

It happened to David. He had it all, power, money, prestige, respect. Yet none of that stood as guard between David and his decisions surrounding Bathsheba. Bathsheba was beautiful and very married. Her husband, Uriah, was one of the most loyal soldiers his King, David, could wish for. His loyal soldier was away, fighting in David’s army, leaving David to walk down a path of no return, and leaving Bathsheba with little choice but to do her King’s bidding when he makes the decision to sleep with her.

David, David, David. Why? In our hearts, we don’t want this. We don’t want David to make the wrong choices. It is from David’s line, we have Jesus. All the way from Abraham, through generations to Boaz, the father of Obed by Ruth and Obed the father of Jesse, the father of David.

And we want to face David, the recipient of all that honor, virtue and faithfulness, and ask him how he dared to squander that kind of inheritance.

It would be his son, Solomon, born of Bathsheba, who would begin to bring the legacy back to center and it would be almost thirty generations to bring it to the feet of Joseph the husband of Mary, and to the heart of Jesus, born to die for the sins of us all.

David committed the sin the adultery big time. He knew he could get away with it because of who he was. A popular king, on top of the world. After all, in that time, although adultery was a punishable crime, discreet and loyal servants could be paid and rewarded for keeping silent about the indiscreet and disloyal fun and games of their powerful masters.

Of course, the inevitable happened. Bathsheba became pregnant and told David and, since there being no sight or sound of her husband, who was out fighting David’s enemies in the battlefield, there could only be one who was responsible for the coming child.

We could almost get to a place of forgiveness of David, had he confessed to Uriah that he had taken the wife of one his most loyal soldiers to bed, thus losing some measure of respect from Uriah and having to ask for forgiveness from one far below the heady heights of kingship. But David couldn’t do something like that. To do so, he was desperately afraid of losing any measure of his power and he makes the choice that leaves the next hundreds of generations aghast.

Samuel didn’t leave any room for conjecture in his account of how the deceit of Uriah was left impotent in the face of Uriah’s loyalty, and David, now in a frenzy to hide his misdeeds and with an intense need to get back to where he wanted to be, has Uriah killed. King David of Judah and all of Israel, has committed calculated murder.

He wanted and he took. He took whatever he needed to take in order to satisfy himself and to cover his tracks. Samuel doesn’t tell us about the anxiety, the grief, the distaste and fallen respect that his immense crime left in its wake, as does every crime of violence at any time and in any place. David robbed Uriah of his wife, his marriage and his life, thereby robbing his and the lives of all who knew and loved Uriah of their natural courses toward future happiness and contentment.

And he chose Joab to carry out his dirty work. Joab was a relative of David’s and commander of his army, with his own questionable resume of indiscriminate killings and murder. Joab, a nasty piece of work if ever there was one, was just the guy to carry out the plot to kill Uriah. He did so without a second thought. But it is David that Samuel want to imprint on our minds as the one who masterminded the plot and whose fall from grace we are to remember.

David, David, David…..for all his greatness, now remembered as a adulterer, murderer, a thief of human souls to the detriment of his own.

He should have known better from his own past experience of loss as told in the first chapter of Samuel, when his beloved Jonathan was slain, when he exclaimed, “How are the mighty (innocent) fallen.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

It is interesting, then, to note that Samuel’s story of David’s crime coincides with the very different story we heard about in John’s Gospel. One cannot help but recall Jesus in the wilderness, tempted by Satan, not once but three times. His hunger and self-satisfaction was tempted, his ego and his opportunity for kingdoms and untold wealth were tempted, and yet Jesus turns away from all that and holds the line that will become his own legacy.

A legacy of giving rather than taking, of giving life and sustenance rather than taking away life and all that life might offer. It is the story of feeding the hearts, minds and bodies of many others, rather than desiring to feed only one’s own self-satisfaction. Jesus and a young boy share in a story of radical generosity.

Theirs is to ensure all are given whatever kind of food is longed for, with no need for taking steps to protect their own reputations, no need to cover up any crime, no plot to make one’s way easier. Just an act of giving, of building up rather than tearing down, of giving of oneself. And, without fashioning it in any way, establishing a different kind of legacy for the generations to come. One of deep and profound caring for human life, rather than an utter discounting of its value to suit one’s own ends.

Both stories are deeply distant, to be read about far from the time they occurred. But the choices that were made by the main characters, are as loud and clear as if they happened today. The scenes we know so well in history, are just as well known to us in our own time. We have seen the powerful fall from grace over and over in our day and are no strangers to the dangerous and disastrous choices made by people of this generation in our own nations and cities.

Like it or not, we have all experienced some kind of fall from grace. It happens to us all in various degrees, which is why we hold on so long to our regrets and wisdom gleaned from our mistaken choices. But most of us have less distance to fall, and in time, and with care and love, our mistakes can be forgiven, even if not forgotten, and we learn from our poor choices of the past and move into a better way of living beyond them.

Yet, even so, perhaps the stories of today serve as a wakeup call to each of us, as we languidly follow our usual patterns of reactions and choices between taking and giving in life.

We might do well to remember God’s gifts to God’s people, whether feeding the Israelites in the wilderness with manna to keep them alive, or by feeding thousands of people in the name of their survival by the Sea of Galilee. Or, perhaps, by the story of Jesus walking on the water toward the disciples’ boat, whereupon the boat finds land even amidst a strong and stormy sea, we are reminded again that God gives and does not take away.

From the beginning of time, God has been there to guide, prompt, urge and lead us into right choices and to give all that God can give to us for our comfort and the survival of our faithful souls. God even gave us free will with which to receive God’s gifts or to ignore them, giving preference to human choices which often lead us far away from God’s ever-present green pastures and still waters.

These powerful stories remind us of our choices to give and give again, in body, mind and spirit. It is these kind of choices, which you all know and all have made in years past and in the present time, and will continue to make. These choices of human kindness, consideration, respect and love. It is this way that Jesus invites to follow, saying “I am the way of the truth and of the life.[[2]](#footnote-2)”

Shortly we will take our nourishment of God’s gift of life and truth, as we participate in the Eucharist. And as we do, we remember another who fell from power but who was delivered up into grace again, and who said in his letter to the Ephesians “For the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

As followers of the way, we like Paul, can fall down in shame for our past actions, but with faith and with re-opened eyes, we can receive absolution and the opportunity to continue filled with God’s gift of grace. God will never cease to give and God will never take away. It is the legacy that David knew well, and that Jesus proved and taught his disciples. And we can recall that David did suffer the consequences of his actions. He received the same kind of comeuppance we all wait for when we see the bad guy brought to justice in one of the many crime shows we can choose to watch on television or at the movies. More importantly, while David will receive absolution but will never be able to shake loose of his shame or memory of his actions, and he never chose such a deadly course of action again.

We all have the capacity to give. We can all reach out to the ones who are making wrong choices, and with love and kindness, eliminate some small piece of ugliness from God’s beautiful gift of the world and all creation.

Like David, we all learn and the question remains: whether to give or to take. That is the question and the choice.

Amen.

Written to the Glory of God

E. J. R. Culver+

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1. 2 Samuel 1:17 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John 14:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ephesians 5:9 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)