



Pentecost 9
Proper 12 (B)

Takers or Givers

RCL: [RCL] 2 Samuel 11:1-1; Psalm 14; Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

The penultimate paragraph of this sermon, which appears in brackets below, may be omitted at services where Holy Communion is not distributed.

We see it from time to time. Someone performs brave deeds, enjoys great advantages, reaches a lofty position of prominence. Defeat seems impossible. Then comes stumbling, falling headlong, breaking in pieces on the rocks due to the wrong choices. The rest of the story plays out the consequences of this disaster. Not only one person, but many others also are defeated; a nation is left limping.

We see it from time to time, this fall from tremendous heights.

Consider David. What has the Lord given him? Victory over Goliath, protection against Saul, a royal daughter in marriage. The kingdom of Israel, the kingdom of Judah, Jerusalem to be his capital. David rescues allies, defeats enemies, prevails in one battle after another, brings God's ark home to Jerusalem with abundant rejoicing.

But then one spring day, with the army out in the field risking their lives, David rises from a long nap at his comfortable palace and everything starts to unravel.

He catches sight of a very beautiful woman over at the house next door and ends up sleeping with her. Although a capital crime under the law, this adultery represents no threat to the king. Only a few loyal servants know about the incident; they are discreet. Case closed.

Many weeks pass, and David receives a message from the woman, whose name is Bathsheba. "I am with child," is what she tells him. She's pregnant. David is the father. The woman's husband, a soldier from a prominent family, has been out in the field so long, there's no way the child is his.

Here, David moves from crime to cover up. He calls Uriah, the woman's husband, back from the battlefield. If he spends a night with her, he and everyone else will assume that the baby is his.

But the plot does not work. Uriah is too much the loyal soldier. He does not sleep with his wife Bathsheba, believing that to do so would betray his buddies out in the trenches. Instead, he stays with David's guard detail. David even gets Uriah drunk, but still the loyal soldier denies himself the pleasures of home.

Frustrated, David takes the cover up to the point of calculated murder. He sends Uriah back to the front with a sealed message to his commander Joab. This message results in Uriah dying in battle, betrayed by his commander and his king.

David is one of the most prominent figures in the entire Bible. He appears as a man of great virtues and great vices. In the story of Bathsheba and Uriah, what stands out above all is David as a taker. He takes and takes again, to the great detriment of many people.

He takes their marriage from Bathsheba and Uriah. He takes Uriah's life. He takes something from Joab as well, by making him his accomplice in a murder. The taking from people does not stop here, but continues on for generations, as the Bathsheba incident eventually splits the nation, harming subsequent generations and people David never sees.

So today we hear of adultery and cover up and the betrayal to death of an innocent man. David hurtles from grace; he appears as a taker and nothing more.

We also hear a story of a hungry crowd out in the country. Jesus feeds them all with an abundance of fish, an abundance of bread. His partner in showing concern is a boy willing to give up his lunch for others. This boy and Jesus are a pair of givers. Everybody's fed, with a startling supply of leftovers for later. There's no crime and no cover up here, but a conspiracy to give, rather than take, launched by a pair of generous people. And it works. Nobody crashes.

These two stories are as obvious as billboards. Each one of us, on many occasions, faces a choice. We can be takers or we can be givers. Like David, we can enter into crime and cover up. Like Jesus and that anonymous boy, we can give to people who otherwise would suffer.

David's story is ancient, but it is also contemporary. We see it played out, often among the prominent in our society. Some in our time are takers.

The story of five thousand fed is ancient, but it also is contemporary. This story is played out repeatedly, although sometimes it remains a secret. Our contemporaries include givers.

To be givers or takers: we always have the choice. But as humans, we become creatures of habit. We fall into patterns we may not even recognize.

So here's something that may help us in our decision between taking, taking and giving, giving.

Today's gospel includes echoes of the Exodus account that we need to recognize, for they tell us—in case we need a reminder—where the living God is to be found between those who take or those who give.

This gospel includes two stories. First, Jesus feeds the five thousand, showing compassion to the hungry and building on the generosity of a boy who gave up his lunch. Second, Jesus walks on water to the disciples' boat and immediately the boat reaches land, despite the strong wind that is blowing.

The story about passing safely across the storm-tossed lake recalls Israel's passage through the Red Sea.

The story about feeding the hungry crowd recalls the manna that fed the Israelites as they journeyed to the Promised Land.

The connection between the Exodus account and these two stories about Jesus indicates that what happened with the five thousand and what happened with the disciples on the lake are not isolated incidents. Instead, they point to a pattern about how God works. Old Testament or New, ancient times or now, God is not a taker, but a giver. God guides us and feeds us. And guess what? God looks for us to focus in our behavior not on taking, but on giving.

In our time, we have at hand abundant examples, some in high places, of the taking and taking that devastated David, his family, and his people, with disastrous results through subsequent generations.

We also have abundant examples of the sort of giving and giving by which lives are sustained and enhanced. You have seen these kindnesses. You have participated in them.

This giving is the way of life that God blesses. This is the spiritual practice to which we are called.

[And guess what? Jesus is still generous with bread. Once it was nourishment for a day. Now, it is nourishment for eternal life, available here in the Eucharist.]

As Christians we know that God gives. We know that Christ gives. And we recognize as well that we also can be givers. We can even summon back the takers from the way of death and offer to them the gift of life that God ardently intends for everyone.

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