

Allow stories to provide growth, healing and change

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Children's Story

2 Samuel 11.26 – 12.13a

Remember last week's story about the three terrible things King David did? David didn't lead his soldiers out to battle; instead, he stayed safe and comfortable at home. David decided he liked the wife of one of his soldiers and he just took her for himself. And David had his loyal soldier Uriah killed so he could keep Uriah's wife for himself.

God was not happy with David. But it's as though David didn't care about that; as though he were closed. How could God get through to David; how could God help David become a good King again? ... God did it with a story.

God gave his prophet Nathan a story to tell David. It's a special sort of story that we call a parable. Jesus told lots of wonderful parables. They're stories about other people and what they do and say. When we hear these parable stories, some of them make us feel glad or happy. Other ones can make us feel sad or angry. Parables are stories that open us up to our feelings. And when stories open us up to our feelings, it's possible for us to change – to grow; to get better.

When we don't have stories, and just think about ourselves, it's hard to change, or grow, or get better. It's like tickling yourself under your own arm; it doesn't work. It doesn't make you giggle. It needs someone else to tickle you before it'll work properly. That's like it is with stories; it takes a story about someone else to open our feelings; to help us change and get better.

So God gave Nathan a parable to tell King David; a story about how a rich person hurt a poor person terribly. The story made King David very angry; the story opened up David's feelings. And then Nathan could help King David see the truth about the bad things *he'd* done to *his* poor people. Nathan's parable helped King David see that the three bad things he'd done were really terrible. The parable story that God gave Nathan for King David turned the king's heart from a bad one to a good one again.

Stories are amazing things. They can help a frightened person to become brave; they can help a mean person to become kind. Stories are amazing things. That's why God gives us stories. So let's hear this very special one now.

Sermon

Pentecost + 11 – 8-8-21 – 2 Sam 18 Ps 130 Eph 4 – 5 Jn 6 35
41-51

Today's readings include stories of confrontation and how different people deal with it – confrontation within King David's family, between the nation and God in the Psalm, within the Church family as we're addressed by the Epistle, and in the Gospel, between religious factions in the Jewish family; stories of confrontation.

We thought last week about how stories affect us; how they can expand our world – take our vision beyond our personal concerns, and open our feelings and our minds to grow, to heal, and to change. The stories themselves may be pretty confronting, but they provide us with a bird's-eye perspective on confrontation that helps us see how often competing worthwhile priorities surround conflict. That such stories are preserved and held in common is a gift; it gives us a chance to come to a balanced mind together when we have to handle competing values within our Church family.

Every family handles confrontation differently – many by

avoidance. I enjoy the moment in the film version of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* where Mrs Dashwood's gives advice to her impetuous third daughter. *If you can't think of anything appropriate to say, you will please restrict your remarks to the weather.* I think that's a case of *Steer the conversation around the elephant in the room.* My Mother never shied away from confrontation. If we ever cheeked her, she'd check us in an instant: *Don't you ever forget that I used to change your nappies!*

In the Gospel today, I feel as if the religious leaders try a similar tactic with Jesus. They react to his confronting statements about himself by trying to domesticate him. *We know where he comes from – we know his father and mother –* as though that can neutralise any claim a person might have to being unusual.

They may annoy us, but because we can look at this story from a remoter vantage-point, we can also see that there are competing loyalties involved – there's more than one truth. These Jewish leaders see their sensibilities around blasphemy challenged – this strange miracle worker claims to have descended from heaven – a human claiming some sort of parity with God! They wanted to defend God's good name. So both sides were loyal to God. But they didn't agree on that.

When our Zoom study group suggested that today's sermon should focus on all the good advice about interpersonal relations that the Epistle gives us, I was a bit taken aback. You want me to talk to a church full of decent, generous people about being kind and thoughtful to each other? Isn't that preaching to the converted?

But then our conversation somehow drifted into the way our church is different from others. We got some glowing reports, I can tell you. But they were expressed by way of unflattering contrasts with other churches – who are actually doing their best to be faithful followers of Jesus too. So I wondered if

we shouldn't spend a few moments thinking about the Ephesians passage after all.

First, we're told to tell the truth to each other. We've just seen how that's a dangerous business to start with. David's story tells us that his truth was love for his son, the usurper Absalom. But David's general Joab had another truth; Absalom alive was a danger to his King. Or in the Gospel, Jesus' truth is blasphemy to Jewish religious leaders. So yes, tell the truth, but do so fully aware that it will sound very different to its hearer, and they may well tell us some truths we can't hear easily too; even an old friend might surprise us this way.

We're given permission to get angry with others, but we're meant to sort our differences out as soon as possible – preferably before bed time. Otherwise, the anger becomes a driving force in our choices and our relationships.

I like the advice to thieves. They're not meant to stop robbing because it's wrong; no, they're asked to take on an occupation which will be a blessing to the needy.

Then there's the prohibition of evil talk. Again, a constructive alternative is offered; say only what builds up. Don't restrict our remarks to the weather; better things are possible, even confrontation. At our baptism, we were sealed with the Holy Spirit. But if the fruits of our hearts are bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander and malice, then something is definitely wrong. We're not allowing the Spirit to work within us if that's happening. Rather, we're called every day to become more like God. As one of our study group put it, *embrace the life of the Spirit; trust God.*

So let's read the stories and learn from them; ponder them; open ourselves to the new growth, the healing and the sanctifying change they hold for us. Amen.