

<i>Date Preached</i>	01-Aug-2021	<i>Date Initiated</i>	20-Jul-2021
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Proper 13, Yr B

" [the rich man] was loath to take one of his own flock or herd
to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him,
but he took the poor man's lamb' "



It happens every day in family rooms, nursery schools and sandboxes all around the world, doesn't it? Two children are playing along happily, each with a toy of her own when, for no discernable reason, one of them reaches out and snatches away the other's plaything. No longer content with just the shovel and the bucket, she *also* wants the sieve. Or, "I know I was playing with the red truck, but I *need* the blue car, too!" I don't know why, but I remember a time when my sister and I were staying with our grandparents for the weekend. We were eating lunch, and I suddenly reached over and tried to grab some of my sister's potato chips. I had plenty of my own chips: I just decided that I needed *hers*, too. (Needless to say, my little gambit didn't go over very well.)

These tales of little ones' egos are familiar and harmless, but they threaten to turn toxic in adulthood, as we find out in the story of David and Uriah, which we began hearing last week. To refresh our memories: While the Israelite army is off fighting, King David, who's remained behind in Jerusalem, spies Bathsheba, who is married to Uriah, a soldier. David has an affair with her, learns she is pregnant and then encourages Uriah, whom David recalls from the front, into being intimate with Bathsheba, so he will think the baby is his own. When Uriah refuses the comforts of home while his comrades are off fighting, David sends him back to the front. He then orders his general to place Uriah, by himself, at the head of the next advance against the enemy, so he cannot fail to be killed. In today's reading, God reacts to David's evil scheme: "I have given you—a lowly shepherd—more than you could ever have imagined," the Lord tells David through the prophet Nathan, "and you respond by grabbing still *more?*"¹ And immediately, as we hear, David acknowledges his sin against the Lord.

That David has sinned—many times over—in this episode is beyond doubt, but how would we *name* his sin? There are almost too many choices, aren't there? He has been lustful, covetous, deceptive and unjust.² He has commanded the death of the man whom he's cuckolded ... and then contrived to make it look like a casualty of war. But what would we say is David's *ultimate* sin? We could name envy—the coveting of what someone else enjoys—but that doesn't seem to cover the entire gamut of David's wrongs. Perhaps we might say it is arrogance: a mindset of entitlement to whatever one wishes ... an unwarranted attitude of deserving, of being owed. That's a bit closer, but it still doesn't capture the *full* measure of David's evil ... because it doesn't take into account that

¹ God goes on to tell David that his line is destined for violence and in-fighting. And, indeed, from here on out, David's family life will be a toxic stew of rape, murder, rebellion and death.

² As an aside, I do not add infidelity to the list of David's sins because at least before the Babylonian exile, polygyny (a man's being married to multiple wives) was not against the law. Indeed, it was not uncommon in the Ancient Near East, at least among those of financial means.

he is the anointed of God: that the power he wields is given to him for the benefit of *all* of God's people.

And *this*, I think, is the crux of the matter: David abuses and distorts the power God has ordained in him and bends it, cruelly and violently, to his own selfish ends. Without in any way seeking to diminish or relativize the sins David commits against Uriah and Bathsheba^{3,4}—and they are myriad ... the über-sin of David, if you will, is exercising the dominion God has granted him to *abuse* God's people, rather than helping them flourish; is using that power to feed his own appetites and glory in his own ego ... instead of being thankful for God's gracious generosity and paying it forward. Just as the child who snatches away *all* of the toys is a bully ... a ruler who cannot distinguish between ENOUGH and EXCESS becomes, God warns, the enemy of those he's been chosen to serve.

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The duty to self-regulate one's own power ... to know the difference between acquiring ENOUGH and lusting after EXCESS ... is not the province of kings and rulers, alone. No, it is a *personal* obligation ... an ethical obligation ... indeed, a *Christian* obligation, incumbent upon all of us. Like the bounty David receives from God, we already enjoy, in Christ's mercy, love and salvation, everything we could ever want or need. And, as with David, what pleases God is when we use ... deploy ... maybe even sacrifice ... our EVERYTHING, gladly and gratefully ... so that all of God's people may realize the divine promise that resides within *them*, too.

However distant the rapacious deeds of an ancient king may seem to us today, the God of David insists that we, *too*, weigh and assess what is ENOUGH *versus* what is EXCESS, in our own lives. Being mindful of how—and how *much*—we expend our time, our money and our influence is an essential practice of Christian faith. Weighing the economic and environmental impact of what we consume and discard ... the societal impact of the positions we hold and the candidates we support ... the emotional, psychological and spiritual impact of how we treat others—both known and unknown to us: All of these are assessments Jesus asks us—*nay, commands* us—to make as we enjoy the fruits of all that God has bestowed on us. Even something as simple as maintaining a civil tone when discussing current events with someone from the proverbial other side of the aisle ... and seeking to understand the *values* that underpin their perspective, no matter how much we disagree with their opinions: This is an example of checking our egos and reining in our pursuit of personal EXCESS ... so that it doesn't risk destroying the ENOUGH that society requires if it is to function for *everyone*.

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³ And also Joab, his general, to whom David issues a patently unethical order.

⁴ I note, for completeness, that David does marry Bathsheba after Uriah's death. Although the son of their first union is taken by the Lord, the son of their marriage is Solomon, the final king of a united Israel, who builds the First Temple in Jerusalem.

In words we never hear in church,⁵ the Lord asks,⁶ through the prophet Ezekiel, "Is it not ENOUGH for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you *also* trample the rest of your pasture with your feet? Is it not ENOUGH for you to drink clear water? Must you *also* muddy the rest with your feet? Must my flock feed on what you have trampled and drink what you have muddied ...?" God never begrudges our having ENOUGH ... of our partaking of creation and ordering our lives in a way that allows us to fully realize our own God-given potential. But when our personal pursuits cause others poverty or pain, despondency or despair ... when the exercise of our own rights and powers diminishes the dignity and equal worth of others ... when what remains after we've had our fill is undesirable, un-cared-for or unfit to consume ... then we, like David, have morphed our ENOUGH into EXCESS. And for this lack of pity, we, like David, will surely hear from God.



*The Rev Douglas S Worthington
St Andrew's Parish
Kent, CT*

⁵ These verses (Ezekiel 34:18-19; I quote the New International Version translation here) are never appointed for Holy Eucharist on the Lord's Day or any principal or major feast or fast. They are appointed in the lectionary for the Daily Office.

⁶ The objects of the Lord's questions are the later kings of Israel—the kings who had led God's people into being taken into exile in Babylon.