

8.20.2023 Trinity 11 (Luke 18:9-14)

I once heard a story about Frederick II, an 18th-century king of Prussia, who, while inspecting a Berlin prison, was met with the desperate cries of many prisoners who fell to the ground in protest of their unjust imprisonment. While listening to their pleas of innocence, Frederick saw a solitary figure in the corner, a prisoner who was seemingly unconcerned with all the commotion. Frederick asked him, "Why are you here?" The prisoner replied, "Armed robbery, your Majesty." "Were you guilty?" the king asked. "Yes, I am guilty," replied the prisoner, "and I deserve this punishment." At those words Frederick called for the warden, and said, "Release this guilty man immediately. I will not have him kept in this prison where he will undoubtedly corrupt all the good, innocent people who occupy it."

The "good, innocent people" who occupied this prison present us with an excellent example of the ability humans have to deceive themselves. We can be sure that many of these prisoners had, in their own minds, come up with elaborate ways to excuse their criminal actions, had altered details to avoid any sense of wrongdoing, or had blamed others in order to steer clear of personal responsibility in the crimes for which they'd been imprisoned. The lies they told Frederick that day as they professed their innocence, were the same lies they had been telling themselves all along to justify their actions, and while we can try to deceive ourselves into thinking that such self-deception is a relatively rare phenomenon, the truth of the matter is that this kind of behavior is commonly recognized not only in captives, but also in kings. We see it from the prison to the palace, and everywhere in-between.

One of the most notable examples of self-deception found in Holy Scripture is the story of King David and his adulterous affair with Bathsheba. David is a king the Bible describes as a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14), but even he is not immune from the temptation to avoid the truth about who he is, and what he has done. In 2 Samuel (11:1-27), we read about David, who "*at the time when kings go off to war... remained in Jerusalem,*" and one evening, when the king should've been with his men in battle, "*David got up from his bed and strolled around on the roof of the palace. And from the roof he saw a beautiful woman bathing - a very beautiful woman. So David sent and inquired about the woman, and he was told, 'This is*

*Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite.’ Then David sent messengers to get her, and when she came to him, he slept with her. Then she returned home. And the woman conceived and sent word to David, saying, ‘I am pregnant’” (11:2-5).*

After hearing this news, we’re told that David sent for Uriah, Bathsheba’s husband, one of David’s own *mighty men* (1 Chronicles 11:10-47), his most loyal, valiant soldiers, a man who David must send for because Uriah is where the King should be - Uriah is fighting for their nation, and for his King. David sent orders for Uriah to return home to his wife hoping their reunion would cover up his adultery, but Uriah didn’t cooperate. His well-formed conscience wouldn’t allow him to sleep in his own bed with his wife while the other soldiers were camped on the battlefield. Scripture tells us that Uriah *“slept at the door of the palace with all his master’s servants; he did not go down to his house,”* (11:9), and when David’s first plan fails, he sends a letter to the front lines with the order to *“Put Uriah at the front of the fiercest battle: then withdraw from him, so that he may be struck down and killed”* (11:15). Uriah is killed at David’s order, and after his death, and Bathsheba’s appointed time of mourning is over, David takes Uriah’s wife to be his own, and she gives birth to his son.

It’s at this point that the Lord sent the prophet Nathan to confront David by telling him a story about two men, *“one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a great number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one small ewe lamb that he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food and drank from his cup; it slept in his arms and was like a daughter to him. Now a traveler came to the rich man, who refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the poor man’s lamb and prepared it for his guest”* (2 Samuel 12:1-4). After hearing this story, *“David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan: ‘As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this deserves to die!’”* (vs. 5). *“Then Nathan said to David, ‘You are that man!’”* (vs. 7).

The story of David’s complete failure with Bathsheba is often brought up to point out the fact that even a person after God’s own heart can fail miserably, but today we recognize another aspect of this story - the way it illustrates the

ability we all have to deceive ourselves. We know that David was deceiving himself in this situation, because until Nathan confronts him with the truth (*You are that man!*), David shows absolutely no remorse for any of his actions. It's even easy for us to imagine the lies he could've been telling himself along the way. In regards to his adultery, perhaps David said to himself, as *that man*, "I know that my love for Bathsheba is far greater than any feeling Uriah has for her, and the life I can provide for her, as the King of Israel, surpasses anything any man could offer. Therefore, it is the depth of my love for her which requires that I take her as my own, and provide this, the best life for her." Regarding the murder of Uriah, perhaps David said to himself, "As the King, do I not have the right to send any of my soldiers into any part of the battle? Uriah was ordered to the front of the fiercest battle, and there he fell, not because I murdered him, but because in war there are casualties." These are the kind of lies, this is the type of self-deception that would allow David to protect his self-image and clear conscience, while he thought and acted so immorally.

If King David, a man after God's own heart, was able to deceive himself so completely, then so can we, and this truth is also a lesson learned in our Gospel reading today. The parable Jesus told about the Pharisee and the tax collector is another story that reveals the terrible consequences of self-deception. In this parable the Pharisee has deceived himself, as Jesus said, by trusting in his own righteousness. We recognize this fact in his prayer, because we're told that the Pharisee *stood and prayed*, not to God, not as a humble creature before his Omnipotent Creator, but *with himself*, proud and thankful that he is *not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican* (Luke 18:11).

Now, we have no reason to question the Pharisee's description of himself. He was a Pharisee, and no doubt, truthful in his claim to be different than other men. He was not an extortioner, unjust, an adulterer, or even as the publican. The self-deception was not found in the way he described himself, but instead, in who he believed was the source of those good qualities that set him apart from others. The Pharisee pridefully, and dishonestly, credited himself for these gifts of grace he had received from God. His ancestry and upbringing, his education and spiritual formation were gifts that had been given to him, but instead of letting his light so shine before men that they

may see his good works and glorify his Father in Heaven (Matthew 5:16), the Pharisee fasted, prayed, gave alms, and obeyed the Law to glorify himself. His pride, the way he trusted in his own righteousness, was a form of self-deception.

In the examples we've considered: the prisoners who professed their innocence to Frederick, King David, and the prideful Pharisee, we recognize the fact that self-deception is not only a constant temptation we all face, but these stories also reveal the truth that we could very well be lying to ourselves when we are absolutely certain that we're not. The remarkable ability we have to avoid the truth about who we are and what we do poses a great danger to us. We've seen the way self-deception leads to sin that separates us from God, and therefore we must, by His grace, always be prepared to confront this constant threat with objective, absolute Truth.

Jesus said, *"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life"* (John 14:6). He declared, *"To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth hears my voice"* (John 18:37). Like Nathan's voice led David to recognize his self-deception and confess his sin, it is the voice of our Lord, His witness to the Truth, that leads us to recognize the ways we deceive ourselves. The question is: Are we prepared to let the Truth of His Word pierce our hearts, as the words of the prophet Nathan pierced David's heart? Are we willing to take an honest look at ourselves, to the end that we may uncover those areas in our lives in which we've been lured into self-deception? Will we, like David, allow the Truth to humble us, and draw us nearer to God? This is a difficult act. Honesty requires grace and courage, but my friends it is a good and godly and worthwhile endeavor to tell yourself the truth.