

Sunday 18B 2009

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

August 2, 2009

2 Samuel 11:26 - 12:13a

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Martin Luther loved the Ten Commandments. Not only did he put them at the beginning of his Small Catechism. He wrote many sermons on them. And he wrote a devotional guide to *praying* your way through the Ten Commandments.

Last week, we heard the story of King David's immoral campaign to possess a woman. David certainly broke at least four of the Ten Commandments: He coveted another man's wife. He committed adultery. He murdered. And he lied. Had David been examining his life according to the Ten Commandments— which is what Luther urges us to do— he might have avoided this calamity.

As it is, David seems oblivious to his wrongdoing. And so God sends the prophet Nathan. And Nathan tells King David a story about a rich man who took away the lamb— the only lamb— that was owned by a poor man. And David gets very indignant and angry about what this other rich man supposedly did. And says that the rich man deserves to die, and that at the very least, he will make the rich man pay back four times over what he took from the poor man. And Nathan says, "YOU are the man." And finally, David realizes what he has done. The 51st psalm, part of which we used in our worship this morning— the 51st psalm carries this subtitle: "*A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.*" The 51st psalm— which we use on Ash Wednesday— is David's reflection on his sins. Finally.

We Lutherans speak of the Law with a capital "L." The Law is not only the Law of Moses, which includes the Ten Commandments. But it is something that we occasionally call the Law of Christ— where Jesus challenges us to live our lives differently than before. And for us, the Law includes human conscience, which according to Paul, has the power to distinguish right from wrong. We Lutherans are different from, say, the Jews, for whom the Law of Moses is a blessing and a sign of covenant. For us Lutherans, our saying is: *Lex semper accusat*. The Law always accuses. The Law always indicts. It always tells us when we are out of step with God. It tells us when we are wrong. To use Paul's language, the Law puts us to death so that we can be raised by Christ— and for that reason, the Law is good. But it's not something that comforts. It is something that accuses, that confronts, that holds up a mirror and says: "*You are the one.*"

So the prophet Nathan, when he confronts David, uses a story. For us Lutherans, that's the Law at work. Nathan was probably more effective using that technique than he would have been if he

had just recited the Ten Commandments.

Now the Law is different from the Gospel. And just as the Law is not simply the laws given to Moses, the Gospel is not simply the four books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The Gospel is the good news that in Jesus Christ we are reconciled to God. The Law is, if you will, the bad news that we have broken away from God and his plan. And the good news is that in the Lord Jesus, God has rectified things for us. We Lutherans speak of *forensic justification*. Courtroom spirituality, if you will. Judge and jury. That's *forensic*. Just like Dr. Quincy did *forensic* medicine— that's courtroom medicine.

In classic sermons, the Law is the prosecuting attorney and the judge. And they judge us guilty of our sins. And then Jesus is the one who gives us a pardon. Who says that he has paid our jail time in full. He has paid the fees and done the community service, and we are free. Even though we were justly convicted. We are free. If that actually happened to you in an Arizona courtroom, you would be pretty happy about Jesus. Well, that actually has happened to you, just not in an Arizona courtroom. And that's why we're here today, to be happy about Jesus.

So the Law accuses, and the Gospel liberates. But we have to have both. It doesn't make any sense to say that forgiveness is a gift from God, unless we understand that we need that forgiveness because we have done wrong, we've turned away from God, and been and done things that are not the best of what we should be and do. Grace is amazing because amazing grace did not save a good person like me. It did not save a well-adjusted, upstanding, saintly person like me. Grace is amazing because it saved a wretch like me. Or as David says of his own wretchedness in the 51st Psalm: *For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgement. Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.*

God declares to David, through Nathan, that a string of disasters will befall his family. And over the rest of the summer, we'll be seeing those dysfunctional family tragedies. Medieval theologians tried to distinguish between the punishment for sin, and the consequences of sin. The medieval theologians said the punishment for sin (which would be hell) is taken away from us Christians by Jesus Christ and his cross. They said that the consequences of sin, in this life, remain. I'm not sure if God is assigning to David the punishment for sin, or the consequences of sin. And I'm not, either, that God is a medieval theologian. What I am sure of is that God's relationship with David was not broken.

So, this morning, three cheers for the Law. What we normally celebrate is the Amazing Grace. But it is the Law that brings us to grace. And if we stand any chance of not acting like David, it will be because we routinely examine ourselves with the Law— the Ten Commandments, the teachings of Christ, and our conscience. And trusting in the Grace, perhaps we can more freely admit our wrongdoing in the future.

David acted like a cold-blooded killer last week. This week he repents with warmer blood. He, at least, felt profoundly guilty, once it sunk in. Because David was supposed to be so great, this story of Bathsheba was expunged from his record when 1st and 2nd Chronicles re-told the story of his life. And for centuries, what have preachers done to excuse David? We've turned Bathsheba into a bad girl. We figure David was just minding his business on the roof, and she exposed herself to him to seduce him. While the scripture clearly shows that he was in control, and that she was a victim, and that he was truly sorry when he realized what he had done; preachers have made Bathsheba the guilty party in order to save David's reputation. Well, Bath-sheba has suffered enough. David finally took responsibility for his wrongdoing. Let's not keep adding to Bathsheba's problems by blaming her for David's sins.

Three cheers, then, for the Law. It may keep us from sinning. And when we do sin, it brings us back to God, through Jesus Christ. Amen.