



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"The Value of Remorse"**
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading 2 Samuel 11:26-12:10,13-15
Second Reading Galatians 2:11-21
Gospel Luke 7:36-50

The first lesson today, from the 2nd book of Samuel, gives us a story that is particularly disturbing for those of us who love animals. The story that the prophet Nathan recounts is one of only two references that I know of in the entire Bible that I know of to someone owning a *pet*. The image of the lamb being raised in the household of the poor man and then brutally taken and slaughtered by the rich man is really heart-wrenching. And it is *meant* to be. It is a parable, of course, not an historical account, and is used by the prophet to evoke exactly the angry response that King David makes when he says that the heartless rich man should be killed. Nathan's oh-so-dramatic zinger is enough to chill the blood: "*You* are the man!" David, of course, has taken Bathsheba, the wife of the army officer Uriah, and even contrived Uriah's death in battle in order to pave the way for this act. (Somehow, I've always felt upset about the innocent lamb than about Bathsheba, particularly when she's been bathing nude within sight of the royal palace! Was she, perhaps, just a bit "in collusion" with the king in arranging this episode of "moving on up" to the East Side of Jerusalem? Hmmm...) The story reveals a cascade of emotions that comes over the King: shock, sorrow, anger, more shock and then shame. The prophet has played his cards just right and made his point by forcing the King to confront his own actions in the light of how *he himself* responds to the situation presented in the parable. The end result is what we call "remorse."

In modern society, we are not encouraged to deal with remorse very much. We are almost always given wonderful excuses for almost any behavior. A book that I am currently reading on the Episcopal Church in America describes this by saying that "Liberal society must remain neutral in respect to the good. What one can express in public are not notions of good but *preferences*. ... [and] the way in which one establishes preference in the public arena, if it cannot be done by force, is by bargaining. Everything, both in respect to private and public life becomes a 'trade off.'" David, I'm quite sure, would have tried to worm his way out of accountability for contriving Uriah's death on the battlefield with just such a trade-off: "Lord, remember that I've been a good king, a competent shepherd, and I write super psalms! I deserve a break!" But he didn't have a chance. Nathan the Prophet didn't give him the chance, and so the King was left not with an excuse, but with *remorse*.

Of course, there are *two kinds* of remorse, just as there are two kinds of *guilt*. David's is the first kind- *getting caught*. He probably thought he could get away with his little plan- after all, only his general knew about it...and maybe that "floozy in the Jacuzzi" Bathsheba. Things would have gone so well except for that busy-body Nathan who told that story, worthy of Reader's Digest at its most saccharin, about the pet sheep! David, like so many of us, is proved guilty not by *his own* moral sense or the realization of the sin he committed, but because he *got caught*.

The other kind of remorse is illustrated by the episode in today's Gospel. We are told that someone, known only as "a woman of the city, who was a sinner" makes her way into Jesus' company and then performs an extreme act of humility and love- washing His feet with her tears and drying them with her hair before anointing them with oil. Some people have tried to say that she is the famous, or infamous Mary Magdalene, of Da Vinci Code fame. But Luke is discrete about that, even as he is discrete about the woman's past. What we are told is about her present and her future: her act of devotion, performed in the context of remorse for her sins and her unworthiness, evokes Jesus' forgiveness. There is no hint here that she has been accused by Jesus, or discovered in the act of doing...well, *whatever* her particular sin was. No, she has *accused herself* of sin in an act of fearless self-evaluation, and has come to the Lord to address the situation.

I think that Luke's version of this story is very powerful in its understatement and the lack of details what might otherwise let us escape the universal significance of the woman's recognition of her sin and the almost liturgical way she deals with it. We are able to use her example the way that Nathan did the pet sheep- we, too, are flooded with conflicting emotions: embarrassment for the woman, discomfort at her presumption of physical contact with Jesus, and amazement at the abject humiliation that her act represents. But it is *Jesus' own words* that perhaps speak most importantly to us, "Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little."

The Christian Church's call to confession, whether it is public in Sunday worship or private between the person and the minister, is not meant to *cause* guilt or to "catch" the sinner to make him or her feel really, really bad. It is there in order to offer a kind of profound, thorough and utterly, utterly real love that can only come from being completely forgiven for the many sins we have committed. General Confessions, while a nice stop-gap measure, are really not enough. When one has hurt someone, off-hand, insincere "I'm sorry's" don't cut it. You have to say that you recognize what you have done and then do what you can to rectify the situation. In other words, it shouldn't take a story about a lost pet to fill us with healthy remorse, but rather the kind of mirror that Jesus in His Person holds up to the soul to make it realize exactly of how far it is from what God created it to be; not because of *human weakness*, which is a cop-out, but because of *personal sin*.

Neither of our Bible examples today is perfect. The Old Testament lesson ends with the very disturbing news that although David is forgiven, the son that he and Bathsheba have conceived is about to die. This makes a thinking Christian wonder about God's ability to *learn from His own story* about the death of an innocent lamb. Where is His remorse at punishing someone not personally responsible for the sin? And in the Gospel story, we never hear what the "faith" of the woman *is* that is supposed to have saved her- which might be disturbing to those who want that faith to be something that is specific and articulated in words. Perhaps we have to learn that for some people, faith is shown more honestly in what they *do* than in what they *say they believe*.

At the very least, though, the end of Luke's Gospel story promises a happier ending than the Old Testament one does, and reminds us of why it is that we might *want* to go through the soul-searching and gut-wrenching experience of *actually apologizing* to God for making a mess of it, or to someone else whom we have hurt. Why is that? Why, it is quite simply the fulfillment of hearing Jesus own words to us, personally: "Your faith has saved you; go in peace." Not just to escape punishment because we've been caught, but in order to *love much*, because we have been personally forgiven.