

A tale of two kings

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, June 12, 2016.

We know that a person is justified not by works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ. Galatians 2:15

This is a tale of two very different kings. The first is King David, an attractive and appealing man to whom many are drawn by the sheer power of his personality and presence. His accomplishments include conquering Israel's enemies, uniting the people of the nation and establishing the capital in Jerusalem. He is also a man of unbridled ambition and hedonism, traits that we may overlook in people we admire.

In ancient times, women were looked upon as property rather than as people. A man of David's power might take several wives during the course of his lifetime. When he has an adulterous affair with Bathsheba, the wife of one of his soldiers, he tries to cover it up by sending her husband Uriah into the front lines of battle where he is killed. Lacking in compassion and acting out of self-interest, he then takes the widowed Bathsheba as his own wife.

Just when David thinks that he has gotten away with his cruel move, God sends the prophet Nathan to convince him of the seriousness of his sin. Nathan relates to him the story of a rich man with many flocks who uses a poor man's only lamb to feed one of his own guests. David assumes that this story is about someone else and is enraged at the heartlessness of the rich man whom he thinks should be severely punished. Nathan then tells David, "You are that that man." David gets the point and is fully repentant. Life takes a turn for the worse for David and Bathsheba when their son falls ill and eventually dies and the kingdom is rent by strife and civil war. King David is the victim of his own pride, ambition and lack of compassion. In the end, Nathan assures him of God's forgiveness, proving that no cruelty or lack of compassion is beyond redemption.

The other king is very different. He is Christ the King, Christus Rex, the living example of compassion. Jesus is visiting in the home of Simon the Pharisee, a very prosperous man who is very careful to follow all that the law requires of him. However, he lacks one thing. He neglects to show the courtesy of hospitality in welcoming Jesus as his guest by having his feet washed and anointed.

A disreputable but repentant woman is there who washes the feet of Jesus with her tears and dries them with her hair. Jesus ignores the rule that a rabbi is supposed to avoid contact with a woman of her reputation. He is filled with compassion for her and tells her that her sins are forgiven. Unable or unwilling to understand, Simon is only annoyed that Jesus should allow a woman with her reputation to behave in such an effusive way with him.

Jesus tells Simon a parable about forgiveness. She who repented of her sins deserves compassion while Simon as his host not only neglects to offer him hospitality but is also lacking in compassion for the repentant woman. Simon is so preoccupied with what law and custom require that he completely misses the point that loving your neighbor as yourself includes having compassion for a repentant sinner.

Having assured the woman that her faith has saved her, Jesus tells her that she can go in peace. What they share in common is that he who is without sin and she who is a repentant sinner both know the overflowing love that God has for us. Simon, while no doubt a good man, does not appreciate that God welcomes repentant sinners.

At the heart of what Jesus teaches is that compassion goes beyond what the law and custom require. The repentant woman's humility and devotion to Jesus is not because she wants anything from him. She is only expressing her profound thanksgiving for the redeeming love she found in the presence of Christ. His kingship is about God's inclusive and non-judgmental love and compassion for all humanity. Such love given so freely and undeservedly may be uncomfortable for the reluctant observer who thinks that God's love should be restrained.

One of the primary characteristics of Christian maturity is to show the same compassion that we receive. Christian ethics take us way beyond what is expected under the law to include loving even our worst enemy. While this may seem contrary to human nature, it is God's nature to have care and compassion for the least who need it most.

Those who were responsible for taking part in the murderous holocaust in Nazi Germany under Hitler as well as those who were involved in the slaughter of millions in Soviet Russia under Stalin could not plead innocence. It is a mystery how so many could take part in an act of genocide against a whole population without anyone doing anything to stop it.

We can easily become numb to news reports of human suffering whether it is a recent shooting in Dorchester, starving children in Africa, terrorists setting off roadside bombs in Iraq or suicide bombers wreaking havoc both here and abroad. We feel helpless at the sight of starving and neglected people in both hemispheres. When we are reluctant to be compassionate and responsive to the world's suffering, we become hostage to our own oppression.

We have all grown weary of the current political campaign rhetoric and there are still five more months to go. Is it naive to want a leader who has the best interests of the American people at heart? Is it too idealistic to want a leader who will bring out the best in the American people? Is it expecting too much to want a leader who will have compassion for those on the margins of society? Rather than a weakness, compassion is a sign of strength of character. It is the virtue that prevents us from seeking the dignity of every human being.

It is one thing to try to understand human nature and entirely another thing to try to comprehend the nature of God. We may not understand why people behave the way they do, but we can trust that God's nature is to be compassionate. Our hope is that some day we will be able to say that we tried, that we tried to live the example of Christ by our care and compassion, especially for the least of God's people.