

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
June 12, 2016  
Pentecost 4  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

2 Samuel 11:26-12:15  
Psalm 32:1-8  
Galatians 2:11-21  
Luke 7:36-50

Every week at Epworth, before we come to the Lord's Table, we always pray together. Not just any prayer, but a prayer of *confession*. Like other parts of the liturgy that occur regularly, if we are not careful we can begin to say them mindlessly, without giving them the deep and profound thought they deserve.

There is a phrase in our confession that we will recite shortly that says, in part: "Where there is sin or falling short of your will in our lives, *or any spiritual pride, carelessness or presumption on our part*, we earnestly repent and are heartily sorry for our wrongdoings."

Pride. Carelessness. Presumption. Three characteristics that can be deadly in the spiritual life. It's almost as if pride is the worst, because it often leads to carelessness, which in turn can lead to presumption. I looked up the word "presume" in the dictionary this week, and it means: "to take for granted, to assume, to suppose."

Our Scripture lessons today introduce us to two persons who have been infected by the viruses of *pride* and *presumption*.

First is King David, who as King used his power to take the wife of a soldier in his army, and then to cover it up arranged for that soldier to die in battle. A very sad situation.

Perhaps David's position as the King and as a mighty warrior made him susceptible to thinking that he was in some way "above God's law." People in power often fall prey to this kind of thinking. It is a form of pride. And it can lead people in power to a place where they can deceive themselves about what they've done.

That may have been the case with David, because God does not confront David directly with what he has done. Perhaps he has so deceived himself that God has to use an indirect approach to get through to him and to penetrate his consciousness. So God sends the prophet Nathan to tell David a story.

The story reveals how we are often quick to judge others harshly for something that we tolerate in ourselves, and David is drawn into the narrative until his anger boils over. Without realizing it, he indicts himself.

The second person stricken by the spiritual viruses of pride and presumption is the Pharisee who invites Jesus to dinner in our Gospel lesson.

As the story unfolds, we are told that Jesus' host does not offer to Jesus *any* of the common gestures of hospitality that the culture of the day afforded.

Meanwhile, we are told that a “certain immoral woman” learns that Jesus is present, and she makes her way there where she kneels behind Jesus’ feet and begins weeping. As her tears fall on his feet, she wipes them with her hair.

We’re not given any context or backstory for this, but it seems safe to say that this woman had learned of Jesus, or perhaps witnessed him in another context or circumstance. In any event, doing what she does requires enormous courage.

Not only that, but her posture and attitude in this situation is one of great humility and generous love. *It is the very antithesis of pride and presumption.*

And Luke does not waste the irony on us. A few weeks ago we saw Jesus praise the Roman Centurion, the Gentile, the “outsider” for his great faith. And here, in the home of one who ought to receive Jesus with humility and gratitude, it is the “outsider,” the sinful and immoral woman, and not the “religious person” who actually welcomes Jesus with a pure heart.

Jesus’ host is shackled by his *pride* and his *presumption*. He presumes that he knows all about this woman, and worse, he presumes to know about Jesus: “If this man were a prophet, he would really know what’s going on here.”

And perhaps this is what makes pride and presumption so dangerous in our lives. *What makes these twin killers so dangerous is that we are often unaware that they are infecting us. They are silent killers. We literally deceive ourselves about ourselves.*

And because of that, direct confrontation about these things seldom “gets through” to us. It seems that more often, God has to work indirectly with us, as He did with David and the Pharisee. God often has to draw us in to a narrative situation, or to a life circumstance, in order to open our eyes.

I think that is what Jesus did with the Pharisee who hosted him for dinner. He could have confronted the man directly about his pride and arrogance. But instead he gave him a living, embodied person who could reveal it to him.

I’ve always struggled as to how this woman was able to get into the Pharisee’s house and crash this dinner party. The story doesn’t seem to add up. But then verse 47 struck me this week. In verse 47 Jesus says: “Her sins – and I tell you they are many – have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love.”

I think that indeed there has been a prior encounter of Jesus and this woman, and that something happened in that encounter that changed her life. Jesus speaks of her forgiveness as something that has prompted the outpouring of love they’ve just witnessed. “Her sins have been forgiven,” he says, “so she has shown me much love.”

I think that there was a prior encounter, and it was so life-changing for this woman that she has sought Jesus out in gratitude. And Jesus uses this woman as a way to introduce the Pharisee to his own pride and presumption. And in another ironic twist, it is to the *woman*, not the Pharisee, that Jesus says: “Your faith has

saved you; go in peace.” Even though Jesus is a guest in Simon’s home, it is the *woman* who receives Jesus and offers him hospitality.

Jesus’ words, “Go in peace,” are an interesting end to the episode. Here’s a question: Where does one go when told by Christ to “go in peace?” For this woman, the price of her way of life has been that she has been cut off from the very institutions that had the resources to restore her. The one place where she is welcome is the street, among people like herself. What she needs is a community of forgiven and forgiving sinners. What she needs is the *church*.

As we come to the Lord’s Table this morning, let us come with faith. But before we do, let us also pay close attention to the words in the prayer of confession. By God’s grace, may *pride* and *presumption* have no place in our hearts. Instead, may the grace we receive here fill us with compassion and understanding. And may this place be a place of hospitality to Jesus, and to those he loves.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.