

Proper 13B, 2 Samuel 11.26-12.13a

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Maybe you've heard that we're in a presidential election year. It's been a strange, fascinating, and tragic one already. This morning I'm going to risk my reputation as a responsible citizen and tell you that I rarely watch presidential debates for the simple reason that the truth is rarely the winner. This isn't necessarily because politicians are more dishonest than the average American. It's because truth is not even the goal. Not really.

Consider how strange it would be if just once a candidate said, "My opponent makes a very good point. I've changed my mind on the issue and will alter my platform accordingly." We don't watch a debate to get closer to the truth. We watch to see how well each candidate performs. Which I suppose makes these spectacles more like Olympic events. The difference is that Simone Biles doesn't pretend that doing a twisting double backflip proves she knows how to bring down the inflation rate.

But the disconnect between rational argument and the truth isn't limited to presidential debates. It's a feature of our everyday lives.

More than a decade ago, a social psychologist named Jonathan Haidt wrote a book titled, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. I'm sorry to say that it didn't seem to fix things. But in it, he tells a personal story to make one of his main points.

One day, he says, he discovered that he was a chronic liar. He was at home, writing an article on moral psychology when his wife Jayne walked by and asked him not to leave dirty dishes on the counter where she prepared their baby's food.

Here's how Haidt describes what happened next. "My mouth started moving before hers had stopped. Words came out. Those words linked themselves up to say something about the baby having woken up at the same time that our elderly dog barked to ask for a walk and I'm sorry but I just put my breakfast dishes down wherever I could. In my family, caring for a hungry baby and an incontinent dog is a surefire case, so I was acquitted.

"Jayne left the room and I continued working. I was writing about the three basic principles of moral psychology. The first principle is Intuitions come first, Strategic reasoning second...

"So there I was at my desk, writing about how people automatically fabricate justifications of their gut feelings, when suddenly I realized that I had just done the same thing

with my wife. I disliked being criticized, and I had felt a flash of negativity by the time Jayne had gotten to her third word (“Can you not...”). Even before I knew why she was criticizing me, I knew I disagreed with her (because intuitions come first). The instant I knew the content of the criticism (“...leave dirty dishes on the...”), my inner lawyer went to work searching for an excuse (strategic reasoning second). It’s true that I had eaten breakfast, given Max his first bottle, and let Andy out for his first walk, but these events had all happened at separate times. Only when my wife criticized me did I merge them into a composite image of a harried father with too few hands, and I created this fabrication by the time she had completed her one-sentence criticism (“...counter where I make baby food?”). I then lied so quickly and convincingly that my wife and I both believed me.”

I have no idea what Jonathan Haidt is talking about here. But I thought it might resonate with some of you.

The illusion that debate is about reasoning our way to the truth, rather than using reason to defend what we’ve already come to believe, is an illusion that you and I live in every day, isn’t it? It’s why we humans rarely change our minds about anything. At least not about anything that really matters to us. It’s why, when we lose a debate, we instinctively go to work reframing our argument, rather than considering the possibility that we might actually be wrong.

It’s also why I’m coming to think the wonderful old story of the prophet Nathan’s confrontation of David may be about a miracle that’s almost beyond belief, even by biblical standards. It’s unbelievable because it’s a story in which the mind of a king actually changes.

The wife of Uriah, you may recall, was Bathsheba. In this case, the text may not be diminishing her by leaving off her name. It further emphasizes the horror that David has just committed. Bathsheba is someone else’s wife.

Remember the story? David sees Bathsheba bathing on the roof, falls in lust, decides he must have her, and, since powerful men are used to taking whatever and whomever they want, he does. Bathsheba gets pregnant. David needs to cover up his offense. So he sends for her husband, a soldier named Uriah, who is off fighting a battle for David. Because apparently kings went out to battle in the spring, as if it were the ancient equivalent of track and field season. It says that in the text. Look it up.

Anyway, David sends for Uriah, thinking he’ll be glad to be home, will sleep with his wife, and no one else will know that the child she bears is not her husband’s. But Uriah is too noble and too good. He won’t enjoy the comforts of home when his fellow soldiers are at war, and he sleeps at the entrance to the king’s house instead of with his wife. So David has to try another

tack. He tells his commander Joab to send Uriah to the front lines, and when the fighting gets heavy, to pull back so Uriah is killed. Which is precisely what happens.

David is a complex and problematic character, to say the least. He is courageous, filled with faith, a man of joyful, uninhibited prayer at times, and a musician who composes psalms. He is also jealous, objectifying, murderous, conniving. He is also said to be a man after God's own heart. How could this be? Tell me Uriah is a man after God's own heart and I'll say, "hear, hear!" But David? Really?

Well let me float a very tentative minority opinion. What if David is a man after God's own heart in that David's heart, at least on one eventful day, was capable of change?

Centuries ago, when the Christian branch of the Jewish family tree took off in the direction it did, some Christian theologians came to believe God must be "impassible." Not impossible. Impassible. Which is to say that God cannot experience pain or pleasure because of the actions of other beings. If God is God, they reasoned, can't be affected by anything we say or do. God is beyond change, they sometimes said.

There may be good reason to use language like this about God from time to time. We're always speaking in metaphors when we speak about the Divine. There's also a pretty obvious problem with such language if you bother to read the Bible. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Christian Old Testament, God negotiates with prophets, God regrets past decisions and even repents for things God does. In the stories of scripture God actually changes God's mind.

This is a problem if you hold too tightly to the impassibility of God. But what if we came at the stories from another direction. What if to be a person of God's own heart means to be a person whose heart can actually change? Because look around. Or just take a truthful look at your own heart. Aren't we the ones who have a hard time changing? Are't we the ones who will often use our God-given intelligence to rationalize what we want to believe so our minds won't have to change?

The story that the prophet Nathan tells to expose David's sin is a clever one. It traps David in his own moral convictions. How could that rich man take a poor man's only lamb! It's a lead pipe cinch of an argument. But come on, folks. You and I both know that when we get backed into a logical corner by someone else, we almost always instantly start reframing our argument for the next time. But instead of slipping out from under the prophet's fable, when Nathan says, "You are the man," the treacherous king says, "You're right. I am. I am the sinner I have just condemned."

I don't know about you, but I need Christian community for a number of reasons. One of them is because church is one of the few places people come together and admit that one

thing that needs to change, if this world is to be healed and made a little more whole, is us. Week after week we confess our sins. And week after week a priest reminds us we've been forgiven in hopes we will be changed by that grace and will live a little more generously out of our gratitude. I have yet to arrive at a Sunday after a week without a single sin or failure. Even if I've rationalized most of those sins right away as soon as I committed them. One reason I come to church is to remember not just that I need to change, but that I can.

In a few moments we will baptize three more people into the Christian community. The prayer book says the anniversary of the founding of a church is an appropriate day for this. Today is Calvary's 192nd birthday as well, a reminder that baptism is reception into a community that stretches back over time, I suppose.

In the rite, you'll hear mention of sin and Satan will even make a rare appearance in church. For this is not a sacrament made for a world that is not broken in the ways our world is broken. But the purpose of baptism is not to fill us up with guilt and shame. What we pray for the baptized is that God give them each "an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works." We pray, in other words, for the grace that would open hearts to the divine capacity to be changed.

It's a prayer for all of us, of course. There are habits of heart and mind that do not serve us or our world very well. But my instinctive denials and self justifications are not how God actually created my heart to respond. You and I are also people after God's own heart in our deepest, truest selves. Which is to say that you and I also have hearts and minds created with a miraculous capacity for change. With a little prayer and practice in community, we can remember this, even nourish it. So, when a Nathan arrives with the truth, we might find the grace to stay a little more open to the change in us that's needed if our hearts and our world are to be made a little more whole.