



Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 1st, 2021

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a](#)

[Ephesians 4:1-16](#)

[John 6:24-35](#)

Good morning! Good morning, and God's blessings. And welcome to August! I am returning to you refreshed (somewhat) after our long road trip. Our kids had great experiences in their month-long summer camps of language immersion and theater immersion. We had wonderful college visits and tours. We reconnected with family and friends in the Midwest. We discovered new places and visited old happy places. Vacation is good. I am grateful for the time. And I hope you are finding times of restoration, refreshment, rest, and renewal in this summer, even in the midst of ongoing pandemic concerns and the persistent heat and smoke in our region.

Paul's words to the people in Ephesus are powerful guides for us. I hope we can take them to heart and keep them close as a guide. Paul urges the Ephesians to "Lead a life worthy of your calling, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." He prompts them to "speak the truth in love" to each other and to the world around them, and calls them to continuing growth into the full stature of Christ "in every way."

Humility. Gentleness. Patience. Bearing with others in love. Seeking unity and peace. Speaking truth. These virtues, these fruits of the Holy Spirit, are so important for us to hold in mind and to seek to live by – not just in times when life seems smooth, but in challenging and fretful and troubling times such as these.

I confess, friends, that I can at times lose patience with the world around us. I can also retreat into a little tailspin of my own, nurturing anger and frustration about decisions people are making or resisting, feeding my own proud feeling about being right, and yet failing to take the risk of connecting directly with people in the world around me with whom I am frustrated and impatient – failing to speak truth in love, instead holding things to myself and stoking the embers of my own anger. It is not easy to continue to keep to a path of humble, gentle, patient, full presence with others where I seek to pursue and bring truth and love as fully as possible.

I think our continuing journeys with the stories of King David and of our Savior Jesus open ways for us to see how powerful it is to speak truth in love and to point ourselves and others to a better way.

Let's begin with David. We pick up on last week's story, when David is in the peak of his kingship, when there has been growing peace, victory over enemies, expansion and reclaiming of territory, and good relations between the tribes of Israel – and David allows himself to give in to lustful desire and abuses his power to claim more for himself. He gives himself to all of the sin of a leader in power and in beloved position. He takes advantage of his position, thinking he deserves what he desires, and beginning to treat others as pawns to be manipulated on a chess board. He sees a woman bathing and allows himself to give into his desire and lust. As king, he sends for her to come to him. Bathsheba comes to the palace at the calling of the king, and so David takes advantage of his position to seduce her. She becomes pregnant. David seeks to cover his tracks. So he sends Uriah into the heart of battle

and puts him at the front line, ordering that he be left there so that he would likely be killed – in essence, he orders the murder of Uriah.

Now we come to the second part of the story. And we come to a lesson about what it means to speak the truth in love, directly to the person who has abused power.

Let's pause here, to admit just how hard this can be. How many of us have taken that challenge, when we know that someone in power is doing something incredibly wrong, and dared to confront that person – that emperor, or president, or senator, or civil leader, or religious leader, or corporate executive, or family member? How hard it is to speak the truth directly to a person in power! We know there are whistleblowers, who find ways to getting the truth told by finding people on the outside with some authority who can investigate or bring charges, or who can intervene in some way. This is daring in itself, and can result in the whistleblowers being condemned by people in their own group. How much more courage it takes to speak directly to the person who is abusing their power!

When we began this series on power, I told part of the ancient Chinese folktale, “The Tears of Lady Meng.”¹ Lady Meng was the bride of Wan, a man whose name means “ten thousand.” At that time, the wicked emperor, Chi Shi Huangdi, began to enslave his subjects to build the Great Wall along the northern border. The wall kept crumbling even as new progress was made. The emperor took the counsel of advisors and sought to immure (or encase) the bodies of men in the wall as spirit-protectors, to hold the wall together. One counselor suggested seeking a man named Wan to take the place of ten thousand men. And so, Wan is seized on his wedding day and taken to the wall, killed, and encased in the stone. Lady Meng is left broken-hearted. She goes to the wall in sadness, seeking the bones of her husband. She cannot find them, and finally collapses. She weeps, and her tears seep into the ground around the wall. The wall crumbles right there and reveals the bones of her beloved.

We left off here when we talked about the power of courageous vulnerability, of revealing our sorrows and wounds, of speaking and showing the truth. But the story goes on from there. It turns out that the Emperor got wind of Lady Meng and her power over the wall with her tears. He was intrigued and sent for her. He finds that she is beautiful, and is taken with her, and says, “You will be my Empress.” What does one do as a widow when commanded by the Emperor? Lady Meng responds by agreeing if the Emperor fulfills three conditions: 1) Decree of a 49 day festival honoring Wan, her dead husband; 2) Presence of the Emperor and all court officials at Wan's funeral; 3) Erection of a 49-foot-tall terrace over the river, where Lady Meng would make offerings to her dead husband. The Emperor agreed. On the day of the funeral, Lady Meng climbed the terrace and shouted condemnation of the Emperor for the death of her husband and of so many people. The Emperor was enraged and sent soldiers climbing to seize her. But she leapt off the terrace to her death in the rocky riverbed below. It is said that her broken body turned to silver fish that to this day swim in the river and remind people of her story.

Well, this is one path of speaking the truth directly to one who has abused power. Sometimes, speaking the truth against cruel injustice is incredibly risky, and requires calculated strategy. Like Queen Esther, Lady Meng makes use of her position of high favor to request or set conditions so that the truth can be told at a key moment.

¹ This is from a collection published by Hung, Chang-tai (1985). [*Going to the People: Chinese Intellectuals and Folk Literature, 1918–1937*](#). Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. ISBN 0674356268. It is cited and used by Taiwanese theologian, C.S. Song, in his short volume, [*The Tears of Lady Meng: A Parable of People's Political Theology*](#), in which he takes the folktale as a lens through which to show the injustices and cruelties of rulers and regimes in East Asia in the 20th Century.

Nathan, God's prophet, takes a different strategy. He looks to gain entry to David's heart, to bypass his defenses, to open his eyes to himself. And he does this by speaking to what is dear to David – the people of the land whom he really cares about, and sheep that are dear to him from his early life. Nathan reports to David about a poor man who had a beloved lamb, "like a daughter" in the household, and a rich man with many flocks who would not take and kill one of his own for a feast for a visitor, but who instead seized and slew the poor man's beloved lamb for the feast. David is enraged, saying that the rich man should die for such cruel injustice or at least pay back the poor man four times. Nathan has clearly connected with David's warm heart and his strong desire for justice. It is at this point that Nathan holds up the mirror to David and says, "You are the man." He names for David the sin that he has committed, at the moment he is most prepared to hear the truth.

In a world where there is so much abuse of power – as we have seen among presidents and governors, CEOs and police, clergy and scoutmasters, and some of us seeing far too closely in families and workplaces and neighborhoods – in such a world of abuse of power, there is tremendous power that the Holy Spirit brings us to confront sin and abuse, to tell stories, to invite people to see truth clearly. Such words of powerful correction and healing come best from those who have lived in the power of demonstrating humility, gentleness, patience, and loving concern for others. And, as the story continues, we also find there is power in forgiving, as Nathan spoke God's forgiveness to David.

Let's turn, then, to the Gospel, to what we hear of Jesus and the crowd that follows him after multitudes were fed. We are entering an extended time in the coming weeks where we hear of Jesus speaking of himself as the Bread of Life – and all this began with last week's Gospel passage when Jesus takes five loaves and two fish (not even enough of a dinner for the disciples to share), gives thanks to God, and breaks them and has his disciples distribute to others. Everyone is fed, the food keeps coming who knows from where. It is God's providing. Now, this week, we have the crowd following Jesus – sort of stalking him, getting in boats to follow him, then greeting him like they were already there for something else and surprised to see him. "Oh, Master, how did you come to be here?" Jesus sees through the game, and also sees something of the reason they are following him. He sees a shallowness in their desire. They want more food. And, for many of them, their lack of daily bread made them more eager to follow him for fulfilling their basic human need. But Jesus says, "You are following me because your bellies were full and you want them full again. But there is so much more. Come and seek and find more than you ever imagined."

There's a kind of blindness and sin that can come with desperation, where people get so focused on one thing that they miss the bigger range of gifts and possibilities. God's invitation is not to neglect the immediate need – Jesus fed the multitudes. But God's invitation is to begin to relax our death-grip on our immediate concerns and open ourselves to so much more.

In the conversation that Jesus has with the crowd, it is clear that the crowd members are rather stuck in their thinking. They do not see beyond their hunger for bread, and they cannot think beyond the concrete reality of their own senses. Jesus keeps pointing them beyond themselves to God, and beyond the immediate hunger of the moment to the greater hunger of their hearts, minds, and souls for what truly endures through all time. And when they respond to Jesus, not understanding him but asking for "this bread of God which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world," Jesus says, "It's me! I am offering you myself, as you have seen me do for you all along." Jesus says, "I am here to give you myself, freely, for your nurture and growth and for the gift of God's loving presence that will bring you more than you can imagine." Jesus says, "I am the bread of life."

In a world of corrupt power, where people are reduced to thinking only about their next meal or next bill or next paycheck, there is tremendous power in self-giving. Jesus gives himself away, empties himself, opens the last provisions that he and his disciples have for a crowd that is far too big to feed with such meager provisions, and opens the gates of heaven through which God's power and love bring food sufficient for everyone. And Jesus today offers even more to the crowd, saying, "Stick around, and open your eyes and hearts. You are seeking something basic and shallow. I am what you are seeking and am here to bring you so much more that is deeper and higher than you can imagine."

This self-giving is what it means to grow and mature into the full stature of Christ – this is the aim and invitation of our journey of faith and life with Christ the lover of all humankind and all creation. "Follow me." Become what you are created to be – together! In unity, as we move toward Christ and not toward distractions. In love, as we see people through Christ's eyes. In passion, for truth as we see others and the world through the vision of God for each person and this whole world. This true power of the Holy Spirit surges through us, strengthens us beyond our knowing and beyond any expectation, and draws us with vigor and wisdom to speak the truth and open the heart and awaken the world around us to truth and love.

Come, follow Christ. Come, grow and mature in Christ. Come, practice and learn this path of God's power that shows itself through humble, gentle, patient care, love, unashamed honesty, and passion for the truth. Come, be nurtured by the One who comes as food for us all, in every fiber of our being, and for the whole world.