



“Dirty Laundry”
Scripture – 2 Samuel 11:1-15
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, July 29, 2018

Don't go airing your family's dirty laundry.

As the granddaughter of a prim and proper southern woman, I am well-acquainted with this saying ... or, at least, with the attitude behind it. The mindset that secrets are meant to be, well, secret. That everything from Tommy's visit to the principal's office to Aunt Violet's affinity for Atlantic City is a *private* matter, and is certainly not for public consumption.

Don't air our dirty laundry. Heaven forbid we become the subject of town gossip! Can you imagine? — nosy Mrs. Sanders talking about Grandmother's crush on the doctor over bridge? The whole church whispering about Sally being sent home from camp over coffee and donuts!

How many family stories have been hidden behind the pretense of decorum? A reluctance to air the family's dirty laundry has justified concealing all manner of personal lapses—everything from innocuous indiscretions to criminal offenses:

The kids gathering 'round the peep hole in the fence while the neighbor sunbathes.
The endless flirtation Grandpa enjoyed with the boss' wife.
The abuse that rages behind bedroom doors.

The family's reputation depends on it: don't air your dirty laundry in public.

This story from Second Samuel is about our family's dirty laundry. Yes, I did say *our* family. David is not just the most well-known king of ancient Israel — remembered for felling a giant with a sling shot and composing psalms that still give voice to our sorrow and joy. He is the one God chose to reign over an enduring kingdom: “I will raise up your descendant,” God promises David. “I will raise up one of your children to succeed you, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Sam 7:12-13, paraphrase).

God is faithful to this promise. As we recall every year at Christmas, God gives the throne of David to a babe born in Bethlehem (which — lest we forget — is royal David's city). So yes, through Christ, we have been welcomed into the house and family of David. And, as such, his triumphs and trials have become part of our collective story as people of faith. David's dirty laundry is *our* dirty laundry.

Now, it's no surprise that our ancestor David tries to hide this particular episode behind a regal curtain. Because it is jam-packed with the kind of shocking details that are guaranteed to fuel the media circus for months. A lusty and reckless king. An illicit affair. An unplanned pregnancy.

Of course David tries to conceal his sin — to bury his dirty laundry deep in the royal dungeon where it will never see the light of day. But Scripture is intent on hanging it on the clothesline like a warning flag, for all Jerusalem — and the ages — to see.

And see we do — the whole sordid affair, every last “R”-Rated detail.

We see David shirking his kingly duties — relaxing on the rooftop, when he should have been leading Israel's troops into battle. We watch his gaze fall upon a beautiful woman, who is taking the ritual bath required of her before she can return to the temple. We witness the king summon Bathsheba, whom he knows to be the wife of one of his soldiers. And — even if we avert our eyes — we cannot avoid seeing him take her, and bed her, and then send her home.

No doubt David thinks his actions have gone unnoticed. Days, weeks go by. The king's just enjoying his staycation, swinging in a rooftop hammock and drinking margaritas.

Until — one day — the chickens come home to roost. Bathsheba (whose name the text — and David, most likely — have now forgotten) sends word to the palace: “I'm pregnant.” This one little phrase changes everything, at least for the king. It's a classic plot twist, deserving of every cliché in the book. David can no longer get away with his abuse of power. He can't sweep this new development under the rug. But, Lord knows, he tries.

And so we watch David scramble to conceal his sin: He sends for Uriah. He butters him up. He wines and dines him, and sends the war-weary soldier home to his wife. But Uriah is too good, too faithful to king and country. So this *un*-faithful king resorts to an appalling Plan B. So afraid is David of being found out that he sends Bathsheba's husband to the front lines, where enemy fire will do his dirty work.

This — my friends — is really rotten dirty laundry.

Now, let us be clear: From beginning to end, this is a story of *David's* transgression. Though interpreters throughout the ages have tried to cast blame on Bathsheba as well, the fault lies with David — and David alone. In this instance of extra-marital sex it does not take two to tango. It only takes one ... when the one is a king of Israel with the power and arrogance to take what he covets. Moreover, this is not a story of *marital* infidelity; this is a story of *spiritual* infidelity, as the anointed king of Israel chooses personal pleasure over righteous rule.

And — despite the king's attempt to conceal his sin, despite his effort to throw every last piece of dirty laundry down the chute — David will have to come clean. In the very next chapter, Nathan, the prophet who has attended the king since first bringing word of God's promise to the court, confronts David. He tells a parable of a rich man who steals the single, beloved lamb of a poor neighbor. And, as the story ignites a fire of righteous anger within the king, Nathan declares: “You are the man!” *This is your sin. You can hide it no longer.*

So David confesses. He names and claims the wrong he has done, and repents of his sin. And David seeks forgiveness from the God who has pledged steadfast love.

No — repentance does not erase the king's transgression. David — and, of course, Bathsheba — still endure the pain born of his sinfulness. And there are more episodes to come in David's story that will, again, illustrate his human fallibility. But, in this moment, repentance opens the way to transformation. For it allows this wayward servant to recommit his heart to the God who has promised to be faithful. In this moment, repentance is the key

that can open the door to a future in which God uses David and his household to bear divine blessing. This episode becomes a stain on David's legacy, but it does not define his story.

It may be tempting for us — the household of David, the household of Christ — to suppress this chapter of our family story. To strike it from the church's schedule of readings. To rip out the pages detailing David's deviance from the path he is called to follow—detailing this episode that forces us to reckon with our own capacity for sin. After all, we don't like to air out our dirty laundry. We'd prefer to let it sit in the basement where we can ignore its stench.

But if we learn one thing from David's encounter with the prophet, it is that naming and claiming uncomfortable and embarrassing truths is the only way to move whole-heartedly into the future to which God calls us.

So these stories need to be told.

When I was a student at Miami of Ohio, the university would participate in The Clothesline Project — a national movement to raise awareness of one of our cultural sins: violence against women. The Clothesline Project was created with a simple, profound goal: to air society's dirty laundry.

In preparation, the Association for Women Students would invite the community to decorate t-shirts. So with fabric markers and puff paint, students, faculty and staff would give voice to their own stories of pain, or to the stories of family members or friends.

Then, one day in October, we'd hang these t-shirts on clotheslines that crisscrossed Miami's central quad. Hundreds of shirts in a rainbow of colors — each one a somber witness to a girl or woman's experience of violence.

Yes, it was uncomfortable seeing so many shirts flapping in the wind — a daily reminder of the secret pain too many endure. Putting the community's 'dirty laundry' on display like that forced us to reckon with shameful truths, ones we'd prefer to leave hidden in the basement. But, it started the conversation. It got the community talking about ways we can all work to create an environment that is safe and welcoming for all. Airing our dirty laundry was the first, small step in a long journey towards healing and transformation.

Friends — this is the work of the church as well: to name the sins of our past, the sins of our present, and — with the Spirit's help — to take the first steps towards healing and transformation.

Now, it's true that our transgressions are usually far less shocking than those of our ancestor David. For one, we do not hold the power to imagine we could sin so boldly with impunity. But, we have caused pain — as individuals, as communities, as the household of God. So, we too must name and claim sinful choices, hurtful acts. We too must march down to the basement and pick up the piles of dirty laundry and get to work.

Just like two congregations in Greensboro, North Carolina.¹

As you enter the sanctuary of the historic First church, you'll see a plaque that bears a piece of this congregation's family story: "Among the 12 founding members of First Presbyterian Church ... were the enslaved servants of the Reverend William D. Paisley (founding minister) and Robert Carson." And then the plaque lists their names: Tony Paisley. Milly Paisley. Molly Paisley. Kezia Carson.

¹ Paul Seebeck, "Church started by the former enslaved members of another church acknowledges shared history" (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/church-started-by-former-slave-members-of-another-church-acknowledge-shared-history/>).

For the first forty three years of this congregation's life these four enslaved members — along with their fellow slaves — sat in the balcony, which was the hottest part of the sanctuary in the summer, and the coldest in the winter. This was the case until 1867, when a group of members — now emancipated — withdrew from First Presbyterian to form a church across town.

“They were tired of the balcony,” said Lynette Hawkins of Saint James Presbyterian —the congregation the thirty-seven former slaves established.

The years passed. These two Greensboro congregations — one predominately white, the other predominately black — each went about the work of being church. Both studied Scripture. Both had potluck suppers. Both served in soup kitchens. Separately. The two communities never interacted; their members never got to know each other. And that old pile of dirty laundry sat, untouched, in the church basement.

Until a few years ago when First Presbyterian Church did a very Presbyterian thing: they formed a task force. This congregation set out to study the effects of racism in their community, in the world. And they began to name the ways they had participated in this systemic sin.

“It's very hard to say we were slave owners,” said one of First Presbyterian's elders. “But you can't move beyond racism until you acknowledge what it is ... [This process] helped [us] see racism as not just a *political* [issue], but a *spiritual* issue.”

Word spread that First Presbyterian Church was engaged in this work; it spread across town, to that congregation of brothers and sisters with shared roots but separate lives. So the pastor of Saint James approached First about holding a joint service of reconciliation. As she put it: “Both congregations needed to understand how wrong [the snare of slavery] was before we could move forward together.”

During that service, both choirs sang. Both pastors preached. The congregations joined together in a litany of lament, naming and claiming the uncomfortable truth that bound them together. During that service, only white people sat in the balcony.

After the benediction, people lingered. They realized that the Spirit was at work in their midst. By airing their family's dirty laundry, they had taken the first, baby steps towards healing and transformation. And they wanted the journey to continue. So they formed dinner groups. Members of First and of Saint James now come together around the tables in each other's' homes: to get to know their sisters and brothers, to speak uncomfortable truths and to hear and acknowledge each other's' stories of pain, to discern how both congregations can work together to transform the world.

This is what's possible when we begin to share the stories that bind our lives and hold us captive. This is what's possible when we air our family's dirty laundry.

So, let's head down to the basement and pick up the piles of soiled towels and stinky t-shirts, and carry up the baskets. We can rig up the clothesline and grab the clothespins. And we will begin to air the household's dirty laundry. Not with the intention of shaming our ancestors or blaming our cousins. Not to shoulder old guilts like sackcloth and ashes. But as a way of giving voice to hard truths. We confess our participation in sinful behaviors before the God who promises to be gracious to us; we share stories of pain with one another, knowing we will be held safe within God's steadfast love. We commit ourselves anew to the God who calls us to be a blessing to others.

And by God's grace, the Spirit will use us — this household of God — to heal and transform the world.

Prayers of the People ~ Greg Jones

Creator of the Cosmos, Mystery beyond our Minds, when we pause to pray we are pulled in opposite directions by the vast contradictions we witness and experience. We give thanks for the gift of life and for the blessings that arouse happiness, health and wholeness. Yet, we concede that

in a world that witnesses too much violence, it may seem callous to talk about joy.
in a world where people are treated with suspicion because of their race or religion,
it may appear clueless to express thanks.
in a world where people grieve the loss of a loved one, it may sound heartless to laugh.
in a world where people suffer from mental illness, it may look selfish to celebrate.
in a world where people live in poverty, it may appear outrageous to rejoice.

Yet, how can we quell our feelings of gratitude for the gift of life? How can we refrain from celebrating that we are not alone in the world, simply left to our own devices? You have been revealed as a loving Spirit

who walks with us in our distress,
who sheds light when we are surrounded by darkness,
who forgives us when we are coldhearted,
who challenges us when we are complacent,
who gives us the capacity to heal people who are wounded,
who guides us to new paths that can transform lives,
who teaches us the things that make for peace,
and who brings life to places shrouded with death.

Gracious God, as Jesus reached out to those in pain, may we have Christ-like compassion for those who suffer, and may we never surrender to despair, because you have given us reasons to rejoice and to never lose hope.

*No storm can shake our inmost calm
While to that rock we're clinging.
Since Christ is Lord of Heaven and earth
How can we keep from singing?*

Now, hear us as we join our voices in the prayer Jesus taught us to pray together, saying, "Our Father..."