

## LIVING INTO OUR IDENTITY

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, August 2, 2009  
College Commissioning – Hiroshima Remembrance – Communion  
First Congregational United Church of Christ, Washington, DC*

### **SCRIPTURE READING: II Samuel 11:26 - 12:15 (excerpted & adapted)**

When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. When the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord, and the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him." Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."

Nathan said to David, "You are the man![...] Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised the Lord, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife...."

David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord." Nathan said to David, "Now the Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child that is born to you shall die." Then Nathan went to his house. The Lord struck the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and it became very ill.

### **SCRIPTURE READING: Ephesians 4:1-7 (adapted)**

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 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. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. [And] each of us [has been] given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift.

***"IN ESSENTIALS UNITY, IN NON-ESSENTIALS LIBERTY,  
IN ALL THINGS CHARITY"***

**\*SERMON HYMN**

***The Church of Christ, in Every Age***

**NCH, #306**

Today's text from the Hebrew scriptures—the story of the prophet Nathan speaking truth to power—is for me both inspiring and troubling. It is inspiring to me because it affirms the role of the prophet in the affairs of the king—which is in some ways comparable to the role of the church in the affairs of the state. It is troubling to me because it affirms God as a God of vengeance and not mercy. God requires of King David that he “give [his] firstborn for [his] transgression, the fruit of [his] body for the sin of [his] soul” (Micah 6:7)—to say nothing about how the death of this child affects his mother Bathsheba.

This afternoon I'll bracket the issue of divine vengeance, for it demands its own sermon, or even its own sermon series. This afternoon my interest is in unpacking the role of the prophetic church in the affairs of the secular state, with a particular focus on what it means in today's world to claim your identity as a Just Peace Church.

But first, today's lectionary text in its socio-cultural context. “The story contained in the books of Samuel tells of the extraordinary change in the way Israel is governed”<sup>1</sup>—from a tribal confederation to a united kingdom. At the center of this extraordinary change is the monarchy, what we might call the “unitary executive” who wields nearly absolute power over his subjects, and who is convinced that God is on his side. And at the center of the monarchy is King David, whom God has raised up to be the “shepherd” of Israel.

The monarchy was a mixed blessing for Israel, and David was a mixed blessing as king. Like other kings and presidents and even preachers, David was a sometimes combustible mixture of good and evil. He gave into the corruptions of power. He used his power, for instance, to sexually assault Bathsheba, who was married to Uriah, a leader in his army. When David learned that he had gotten Bathsheba pregnant, he arranged for a coverup. He ordered that her husband be brought home on leave, so that Uriah could make love to his wife and the child to be born would appear to be Uriah's and not David's. Uriah, however, adhering to certain customs of ritual purity, did not cooperate with David's scheme, and so David sent him back into battle and arranged for him to be killed by the enemy. He then arranged, after what must have been a rather short time of mourning, to marry Uriah's widow Bathsheba—who had no choice in this arrangement.

Today's text tells us that God was displeased by the thing that David had done, and so God sent the prophet Nathan to confront David with his crimes (rape and murder, to be blunt). If I were Nathan, I would not relish this assignment. The king with his absolute power could arrange to kill Nathan just as easily as he had arranged for the murder of Uriah—think of King Herod and John the Baptist.

Trusting in God's guidance, Nathan takes a narrative approach to his dangerous assignment: he tells a story. The story is ostensibly about a rich and powerful man who takes advantage of a poor and powerless man; the rich man is not a sympathetic figure in this story, but the poor man certainly is. So it's easy for David the hearer of the story, and for us the readers of the story, to pass judgment on the rich man: “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.”

I find it surprising that David does not see himself in this story until Nathan holds up the story as a mirror to David: You are the man! When David sees himself in the mirror of the story, he doesn't like what he sees. We don't know if his anger was kindled against himself; but we do know that he began to see himself as a sinner: I have sinned against the Lord. David is forced to confront his own moral corruption, his identity as a sinner—then he has to live into that identity. This confession is both painful and liberating—because it's the truth, and there are ways in which the truth, as painful as it may be, can set us free.

We can think of David's task of living into a new identity as similar to the task of someone who speaks for the first time at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting: “Hi. My name is Andrew, and I'm an alcoholic.” From what I have observed, it's one thing to say, for the first time at an AA meeting, “I'm an alcoholic.” It's another thing entirely to live into that identity—and to discover how this identity is both painful and liberating, because it's the truth.

It's one thing for an individual, or for a community like a congregation, to claim a particular identity: it's another thing entirely to **live into that identity**.

I want to credit Nancy Withbroe—thank you, Nancy!—for this notion of living into an identity. Not long after I came to be your interim pastor, I became aware of a significant gap

between your claimed *identity* as a Multiracial/Multicultural church, and the *reality* of what I saw when I stood up in front of you on Sunday afternoons. So I decided—unilaterally, though I think accurately—that it was more appropriate to say “committed to becoming a Multiracial/Multicultural church.” Nancy suggested a better way to phrase this: “living into our identity as a Multiracial/Multicultural church.”

More often than not, I suspect, there’s bound to be a gap between a claimed identity and the lived reality of the self: whether we’re talking about an individual or a community. Like the United Church of Christ, and like many UCC congregations, we have a rich history of seeking to discern and articulate and live into a variety of identities: open and affirming; just peace; multiracial/ multicultural; whole earth; you name it, the UCC probably has it. The work of living into these various identities, for our denomination as well as for our congregation, is both a journey and a destination.

This afternoon, for instance, as we remember the atomic bombs our nation’s military dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it’s fitting to reflect on what it means to live into our identity as a just peace church in the nuclear weapons age that began in 1945, the year I was born. I know that within this congregation, as within many American congregations, there is a spectrum of ethical assessments of the bombing of these Japanese cities. Some are convinced that had these bombs not been used, the Japanese would not have surrendered. Others are convinced that ongoing diplomatic negotiations would have led to Japan’s surrender in the early fall of 1945—not as early as August 15, but certainly before any ground invasion of the Japanese mainland.

To remember Hiroshima on the first Sunday in August, as you have done for several years, is not ultimately to debate whether the bomb should or should not have been dropped, but rather to remember the horrors of what happened in the morning of August 6, 1945. And to remember those horrors is to stand humbly before God and pledge: Never again.

When the nuclear weapon named “Little Boy” exploded at 8:16 a.m. in the sky over Hiroshima, “in an instant 80,000 to 140,000 people were killed and 100,000 more were seriously injured. The blast wave shattered windows for a distance of ten miles and was felt as far away as 37 miles. Hiroshima had disappeared under a thick, churning foam of flames and smoke. The co-pilot, Captain Robert Lewis, commented, ‘My God, what have we done?’”<sup>2</sup>

What the bomb did was not only to cause several hundred thousand immediate casualties. It also caused the long-term effects of radiation sickness or radiation poisoning for the *hibakusha*, those who survived the initial explosion, such as Sadako Sasaki, whom we remember today with paper cranes.

Whether or not we believe that this use of nuclear weapons was morally justified or justifiable, I think we all agree that the horror of nuclear weapons is such that they should never again be used in war. To live into our identity as a just peace congregation means that we can envision, and work to build, a global community free from the cancer of nuclear weapons. Perhaps we can even envision, and work to build, a global village without weapons of any kind: with plowshares instead of swords, with pruning hooks instead of spears, with diplomacy instead of destruction.

The great American religious prophet William Sloane Coffin spoke clearly and often of the “axis of evil” confronting the global community: environmental degradation, pandemic poverty, and a world awash with weapons. He challenged the American church, gently yet insistently, not to bless the empire but rather to speak truth to power, as Nathan did to David. As you in this church continue to live into your identity as a just peace church, you will be called to speak truth to power. You will be called to advocate for non-violence in the struggle against the evils of environmental degradation, pandemic poverty, and a world awash with weapons. It is my hope and my prayer that you may know God’s prophetic blessing and guidance as you live into your identity as a just peace church.

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Grant-Henderson, Uniting Church in Australia [accessed July 29, 2009], [http://oldtestamentlectionary.unitingchurch.org.au/2009/August/Pent92Sam11\\_09.htm](http://oldtestamentlectionary.unitingchurch.org.au/2009/August/Pent92Sam11_09.htm).

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.hiroshima-remembered.com/>. Accessed July 29, 2009.