

THE ACCIDENTAL SINNER
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 9B
Psalm 51:1-12

It was a sunny afternoon in May, 1984, and I was sitting in the front seat of a police car, filling out an accident report. It was not really how I had planned to spend my day.

My wife Christy and I were on our way to Pawley's Island, South Carolina, to celebrate her graduation from college. We had just caught sight of the ocean and started across the bridge that connects the island to the mainland. There were people everywhere, fishing in the inlet, strolling across the bridge I slowed almost to a stop, and then heard the screech of tires behind me, and felt the sickening crunch of someone else's car smashing into mine, and then another crunch . . . as another car smashed into that one. A three-car pileup on the Pawley's Island Bridge.

Christy and I were both O.K., but when I stepped out of the car I saw a skinny, red-haired woman walking toward me with her fist drawn back. She shouted out a few choice expletives, and offered to punch me in the face. "It was your fault!" she screamed. "This whole thing was your fault!" And, as coincidence would have it, the fellow who had smashed into her said the same thing. He sat in the back seat of the police car and made his case in a perfect low country accent: "Officer Brunson, if that boy hadn'a stopped his car right in the middle of the bridge I wouldn'a run into this other lady, and she wouldn'a run into him. In other words, if he hadn'a been there, none o' this would'a happened in the first place."

It kind of made sense, and I said so. Officer Brunson turned toward me and asked,

"Are you saying it was your fault?"

“NO! Of course not.” But as I left the car a few minutes later holding a twenty-five dollar fine for IMPROPER PARKING I realized what I should have said. I should have said, “If this fellow had run into the side of the bridge, would it have been the bridge’s fault?”

I never think of those snappy answers when I need them. This other man, however, had convinced the police officer that it was my fault and it serves as an illustration that we human beings are masters of *justification*. The word means, literally, to “make things right.” And when we make mistakes, do some damage, rear-end innocent tourists, we begin to employ this enormous capacity to absolve ourselves of any responsibility. We say, “It wasn’t my fault. He should have been watching where he was going. It was an accident.” By shifting the blame or manipulating the evidence, we make things right—we justify ourselves. And we are really, really good at it. We have been doing it from the very beginning.

So begins the story of David’s adultery with Bathsheba, the most notorious sin in the Bible. “It was the spring of the year,” the writer tells us, “the time when kings go forth to battle.” But King David stayed home in Jerusalem.

This is how sin begins for most of us. We don’t plan it. We don’t scheme. We don’t wake up in the morning thinking, “What a wonderful day for sin!” It just happens, and it usually happens (point number one) when THE CIRCUMSTANCES ARE FAVORABLE, as they were for David. Surely he didn’t send his troops off to war just so he could stay at home and succumb to temptation. If we are going to think the best of him, as the writer of First and Second Samuel has taught us, we will assume that he had a very good reason to stay home. Maybe he was nursing an injury from a previous battle: a pulled calf muscle, a torn rotator cuff. Perhaps his personal physician had told him, “David, I know how you love to mix it up on the battlefield, but this time you’d better stay home.” And so, when all the other kings were going forth to war, David stayed home in Jerusalem. The circumstances were favorable for sin.

It was under these circumstances that David took a walk on the roof of the palace (no doubt a part of his physical therapy). And there it happened, the writer tells us, that David “saw from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful.” Again, this is how it is for us. Even when the circumstances are favorable for sin we don’t usually arrange it. But in that setting (and this is point number two) THE OPPORTUNITY MAY ARISE, and if it should we will find that we are already vulnerable. David was bored and restless. He saw a beautiful woman bathing. He asked, innocently enough, “Who is that?!”

Or maybe it wasn’t so innocent. A recent article in *the Christian Century* explores the full range of sexual exploitation in the Bible, including David’s exploitation of Bathsheba.ⁱ *Rape* is not too strong a word for what happened in the king’s private bedchambers that night. But that’s not the way the author of 2 Samuel tells this story. As I said, he has taught us to think the best of David, and in his report what happens appears to be almost an accident, like the driver who glances up from his smart phone just in time to see himself collide with the car in front of him David may have looked up later that evening to see Bathsheba, resplendent in her finest gown, her hair freshly coiffed, smelling of scented bath oils, coming toward him like something out of a dream. And like a character in a dream himself, David reached out to her, embraced her, and in his lust-drunken stupor never heard the sickening sound of the collision. It was only when he woke up the next morning that he realized what a terrible accident had occurred. Without elaboration the author of this story tells us that Bathsheba returned home.

What happened after that was what happens after any accident. David worked hard to justify his actions, to make them right. If anyone could do it, he could. He was a master of so many things. But we need to remember that this was no small sin: David had broken one of the Ten Commandments (number seven, to be precise). But in his mind the defense must have sounded something like this: “Well, if it hadn’t been for this injury this never would have happened. If the doctor hadn’t told me to stay home from the war this could have been avoided. If that woman hadn’t been out there bathing on

the roof, and if she hadn't been so gosh-darned beautiful, this whole thing might never have occurred. It wasn't my fault, really. It was an accident." But when Bathsheba sends word that one accident has led to another, that their one-night stand has resulted in her pregnancy, David has no choice but to try to cover his tracks.

If you know this story at all you know that David's attempts to hide his sin only make things worse. He invites Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, home from war so he can spend some time with his wife (nudge-nudge, wink-wink), so that when she turns up pregnant he will assume the child is his. When Uriah refuses on the grounds of solidarity with his fellow soldiers, David tries to break down his resolve with liquor, loosen him up in order to send him home to his wife, but again, Uriah stands his ground. In desperation David sends him back to the battle with orders that he be placed on the front line, and it is shortly after that that word comes back from the front: "Your servant, Uriah the Hittite, is dead." And David thinks that the matter is settled, and eventually takes Bathsheba as his wife.

It is sometime later that Nathan the prophet comes calling, telling David the story of two men—one who was very rich and the other who was equally poor. The rich man took the poor man's only lamb, one he loved like a daughter, slaughtered it, and served it to an overnight guest. "Now," said Nathan, "what do you think a man like that deserves?" David was livid. He said to Nathan, "The man who has done this thing deserves to die!" Nathan, almost apologetic, answered, "You are the man." And in that moment the full force of David's sin slapped him in the face, shocked him into silence.

His heart broke like an egg.

It was in this moment, we are told, that the words of Psalm 51 began to gather in David's mind. Words like, "Have mercy on me, O God. Blot out my transgressions." Words like, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight" (though Bathsheba might have disagreed). Words like, "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin." In the conclusion of

this psalm David records what for him is a revelation—the truth that what God wants from us when we sin is not a number of good excuses but genuine remorse, true repentance. “The sacrifice acceptable to God,” he says, “is a broken spirit. A broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.”

Like David, we don’t usually sin on purpose. More often sin sneaks up on us when the conditions are favorable, and when the opportunity arises. Before we know it an accident has occurred, which we try to conceal from God and others. “It wasn’t really my fault. She started it. I was just minding my own business.” We shift blame and manipulate evidence in order to absolve ourselves of our sin when the truth is that no one can absolve us but God alone. Once we have done everything in our power to make things right with the person we have wronged, we turn to the One who has the power to make US right.

On a sunny afternoon in October, 1988, Christy and I were rear-ended again, this time by a sixteen-year-old boy in a green Chevy Super Sport. But this time was different in other ways, too. This time ten-month-old Ellie was in her car seat behind us. We were sitting at a stoplight, waiting for a green light, when I heard the screech of tires, looked into the rear-view mirror, and saw that car coming much too fast. My first thought was for Ellie. I turned to face her, and at the moment of impact I watched the rear window shatter onto her sweet head. She screamed. I jumped from the car, raced around to her side, pulled her from her car seat and saw this frightened boy coming toward me.

“Is he all right?” he asked.

“It’s a she!” I said, brushing pieces of safety glass gently from her hair. Finally I looked up. “It looks like she’s going to be all right.” I checked on Christy and then turned back to the boy, whose eyes by this time were filling with tears. In that moment he said something that demonstrated remarkable maturity. He said, “I’m sorry. It was my fault.” And I said, “It’s O.K.”

Of course, in many ways it wasn't. There was all that glass to sweep up, all that damage to be repaired. But what I meant was that between the two of us things were O.K., and that made all the difference.

This is what David was talking about. He was saying that when the accidents of sin occur (and after we have done everything in our power to make things right with the ones we have wronged) we can make things right between God and ourselves not by offering excuses, not by shifting the blame, but by standing before him like a sixteen-year-old boy and saying, with tears in our eyes, "I'm sorry.

"It was my fault."

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¹ Mary Beth McSwain, "A Hard Class on Hard Stories: Notes from my Adult Ed course about the Bible and the #MeToo Movement," *The Christian Century*, June 30, 2021, pp. 28-31.