

Sunday April 11th, 2021
Easter II

1 Samuel 12:1-10
Series: "People We All Need in Our Lives"
Sermon: "We all Need a Nathan"

Today marks the beginning of a new series that will tie in with our Talk Back sessions. This will be a unique journey as we will explore one of the most critical needs in humanity; our need for relationships. Not just any relationships, but relationships that enhance our lives; or better put, relationships that bring abundant living. This series was not my original idea. I will be piggy-backing throughout on the marvelous work of Dr. Leonard Sweet. Specifically, his book entitled, "*11 Indispensable Relationships you can't be without.*"

Why is this journey so vital to us? Well, simply put; for a long time, we have erroneously believed that what we do, what we accomplish, what we accumulate, or where we are ultimately going are the most important things in life. We believe these things define us, and make life meaningful. To ponder the question of where we are going is important, but not as important as the question of who travels with us.

It is also very true that the joy of life is found not in the journey, but in those we have a relationship with. The story of salvation itself is a story about God's desire to have a relationship with us. Did not Jesus say in John 14:3, "When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so you will always be with me where I am." In other words, God wants us with him. So, our journey over these next weeks will hopefully compel us to look at the people who journey with us, and why certain people are vital to our health and vitality.

To set the stage for today I share with you a little incident from the life of the great evangelist and preacher John Wesley. One day, after preaching on the parable of the talents, a woman of his acquaintance approached Wesley and said, "My talent is to speak my mind." Exasperated, Wesley replied, "Madam, God wouldn't care if you would bury that talent." (1001 Humorous Illustrations, p. 168) In this encounter, Wesley was at least momentarily, being a Nathan for that woman. Nathans are critical to our spiritual health and we all need one.

The name Nathan in Hebrew means "gift", and the Nathan we read about this morning in the bible, was a gift to King David. By the time today's passage has rolled around, Nathan had been giving prophetic council to David on all manner of issues. In 2 Samuel 7 and 1 Chronicles 17 Nathan gives advice on architecture. In 2 Chronicles 29:25 Nathan actually advises David, of all people, on music. In 1 Kings 1:11-40 we read about Nathan's hand in preparing the way for Solomon to succeed David on the throne.

Nathan's relationship with David had been honed over several years and David trusted him. David surely had numerous advisors, but Nathan was the one God spoke through, and Nathan told the truth, even if the truth was very costly. We all like friends who make us feel good. Friends who tell us how wonderful we are, friends who always agree with us, friends who support us even when we are reckless, but are these the kind of friends we truly need.

In 2 Samuel chapters 11 and 12 is the ugliest chapter in David's reign. David had become lazy as a king and as a man. Perhaps it was his midlife crisis.

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The bible says it was spring time when kings went to war, but David stayed home, and on the infamous day in questions he had gone and taken a nap. His armies are at war, and David is napping. We read on further, that he lusted after Bathsheba after seeing her bathe, then plotted to kill Uriah her husband who was a loyal soldier. After a period of mourning, Bathsheba came to the palace, and became one of David's wives and she bore him a son. At the end of chapter eleven, the Davidic line, of which Jesus comes, is in real trouble.

A rot was growing in David, and worse, David believed he had manipulated events in such a way that got him off scot free. There is no sign at this point in the passage that David's conscience is even bothered by any of this. Entering the stage, Nathan, sent by God, comes and tells this story about a poor man who loved his precious lamb, but the rich man who had a number of his own lambs stole it, to kill it, to feed his visitors even though he had lots of sheep of his own.

David was rightly outraged by the story. At least he had some level of justice still in him. David declares, "As surely as the Lord lives, any man who would do such a thing deserves to die." Then the other shoe drops. Nathan turns to David, extends his finger at David and says, "You are that man!" Then Nathan unravels the whole sordid affair with Bathsheba and Uriah. David may have hidden his sin from others, but he could never hide it from God.

What good existed in David, and his kingdom, was in peril because of the way David overstepped his place. Nathan was like a governor to David. What do I mean by governor? Well, have you ever noticed when you are driving behind a transport truck a little sign on the back that reads, "Maximum speed 110km"? The truck could mechanically go a lot faster, but the truck's owner has placed a governor on the engine.

It is a device to place limits on how fast the truck can go. The Nathans in our lives are like governors. They keep us from excesses. They bring us back to stand before the truth and most important of all; they bring us back to God and his path for us. Nathans help us see ourselves for who we truly are, flaws and all. Nathans love us so much that even at the cost of sacrificing our goodwill towards them, they still point the figure.

Now Leonard Sweet makes an important distinction here that we need to understand. The work of a true Nathan is not accountability. Nathans are not about hauling us up on the carpet. One of the buzz words in the modern church is accountability. People are urged to have accountability partners or groups. Churches are urged to hold people to account. In the old revival meeting style, we are encouraged by some church folk, to fill up the sinners' bench every week.

The problem with focusing on accountability is that it is often confused with church politics. People end up monitoring each other for sins, and depending on whether your church is conservative or liberal, the list of sins can be different. Accountability groups have had a very poor track record. How many of you remember the sad story of Ted Haggard, the religious leader caught visiting male prostitutes?

He had very stringent accountability guidelines, but he could still run a secret life. What we need is not accountability but edit-ability.

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What is the job of a book editor? I remember a story years ago about doctoral student who was finishing his thesis and took it to his professor for a final approval.

The professor took the document and said, “Are you sure this is the very best you can do.” The student hemmed and hawed and the professor said, “Take it back and try again, without reading it.” So, the student worked hard reworking and rewriting his work. And he took it back to the professor. The professor said again, “Is this your best work?” Again, the student hesitated and again, the professor sent him back to do revisions.

Finally, on the third try, when the professor asked, “Is this the very best you can do?” The student replied, “Yes, I have wrestled and reworked this thesis and I can do nothing more to improve it.” At that the professor said, “Okay, now I will read it.” That’s what an editor does for us; a Nathan does for us. They push us to be our best. When the well runs dry in our souls, an editor primes the pump.

Accountability is designed to keep us from doing bad things, but editability helps us do good things; actually great things. The question is not “are you accountable”, but rather “are you editable?” Do you mind the manuscript of your life being overhauled by someone else with a red pen? Can we set our own ego aside, and see the greater value in our Nathan’s opinion of the needed edits in our lives?

I should be clear here that the Nathans in our lives are never strangers. For a Nathan to be truly effective they must have a deep relationship with us. Nathan had already counseled David on a wide variety of subjects. We could say that Nathan had traction with David. I can picture the throne room where David’s advisors are pressuring David on some matter, and the king holds up his hand amidst the cacophony of voices to silence them, and he turns to Nathan and says, “What do you think?”

I am pretty sure that if God had sent someone else to confront David, it might have been the last thing that person ever did. But David knew Nathan wanted what was best for him and his kingdom. Nathan even knew how to approach or speak to David to reveal the truth. He told him a story. Nathan used the story to spring a trap. I don’t think Nathan took any pleasure in this encounter, but pleasure is not the goal here.

The Apostle Paul counselled, “Dear Friends, if a Christian is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path.” Did you hear the key words; gentleness and humility? We all know there are people in this world who are looking for us to stumble and sin. Nathan however, wanted David to catch himself. Another way of seeing this is that Nathans help us to do the word.

Sometimes God is telling us to do something but we can’t see the truth clearly. We need Nathans in our lives to edit the situation and our perception of it. This is especially true for anyone in power. It needs to be said that having a Nathan around is not always an enjoyable experience. No one like being edited. However, it is pretty clear when someone is trying to edit your life. There are three things to look for.

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Often a Nathan will get under your skin. Whenever a Nathan is working in your life there is often irritation that comes with their intrusion. The reason this is so is because the problem we are dealing with is never out there; it is always in here.

The best parts of us are in our souls. However, in our souls is an ongoing battle between good and evil. We are always in danger of mishandling our souls. When Paul talks about “works of the flesh” we often think he is referring to sex but he writes that the works of the flesh are “jealousy, anger, envy and competitiveness.” (Gal. 4:19-21, 26) The desires of the flesh are not bad, it is when we act on them that things go horribly wrong.

Nathans always force us to face the ugly truth about our lives, and we do not like it; it irritates us. Nathans also ask questions. Actually, good relationships always include questions, and the deeper the relationship the more intrusive the questions. In life we are always in danger of confusing “good” with “good at”. A good editor, or Nathan, asks us to consider whether God is being glorified in our lives.

A Nathan does not coddle us, or even help us with our problems. A Nathan focuses on the bigger picture of the health of our soul. And perhaps most important of all, a Nathan helps us to see the truth about ourselves. A Nathan will not allow our self-deception to go unchallenged. The truth is, we often see ourselves as more put together than we really are. In truth, we know less than we think we do, and we speak more falsehood than we care to admit.

No matter how hard we try, we can only get so close to the “whole truth”. Truth telling is a major role for a Nathan. But I must be clear, I am not talking about truth dumping, which can be a very cruel thing. Nathans come and get us to own up to the truth, even when we think we have hidden it well. It isn't the Nathans editorial work that haunts us, but rather the truth we are hiding from, or running from that scares us.

A difficult truth can actually concern simple things. Our sins and failings make us look ridiculous more than anything. Who tells us when we have our fly open or dandruff on our shoulder? Christianity has become Nicianity, and Nathans don't live on planet Nice, at least when it comes to us. You know when you've encountered your Nathan when you leave that encounter smarting a bit, but thinking “There are kinder words that could have been said to me, but there aren't truer ones.”

Nathan's practice radical honesty even in simple things. Nathans come in many forms, and I freely admit that your spouse may make your best Nathan in your life. But I ask you; who is your Nathan. Who dares to tell you when you are drifting away from God's intension for you? Who is the one in your life who dares tell you that the new clothes you are wearing, like the emperor in the fable, are nothing at all?

Who dares to tell you when you have said too much, gone too far, are getting too cozy with the wrong person, or that you are just simply too full of yourself? Who is the one, amidst all those who are heaping praise on you who quietly but firmly brings you back to earth? I should also state that who your Nathan is may change from time to time. Relationships are fluid.

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People grow apart for a number of reasons, but if you feel there is no Nathan in your life, ask God for one. And while you are at it why not ask if God will allow you to be a Nathan for someone. Now just one more note of caution. Not everyone who tries to be a Nathan to us will be acceptable to us in that role.

Being a Nathan to someone, is a relationship that must be developed over time. It is built, as it was with King David, by trust. Sometimes we meet people who try take on the Nathan role, but they have no traction in our lives. There can be a number of reasons for this, but mostly it is because we doubt their sincerity. We question their motives.

And finally, and this goes for all the people we will meet in our series, we need to be grateful to those who journey with us, in whatever role they play. In the seventeenth century haiku master Basho was walking around the island of Japan and he got lost. He stopped and asked a farmer for directions, but the farmer said, "It's easier to take my horse. He knows the way. When you get to the next town, just let him go and he'll come home."

So, Basho let the farmer's horse lead him. Once they arrived at the next town, he sent the horse home. But not before tying a gift to the empty saddle. It is very important to tie a gift to the saddle for all those who journey with us. David did that for Nathan in a very special way. He named one of his sons after him. David tied a gift to the saddle.

Who is your Nathan? And how have you appreciated them lately?