

**The Reverend Heather T. Schoenewolf  
East Liberty Presbyterian Church  
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**“True Confessions”**

**2 Samuel 11:26-12:15**

*Read the scripture online (NSRV): <http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=211439180>*

People are complicated. We know it from the stories of our own lives, as we know it from the stories of those around us. Those who are generous and caring can also be selfish and hurtful. Those to whom we look up can also disappoint. We have heard stories about how great presidents throughout the centuries were the initiators of extramarital affairs with women who were slaves and interns and movie stars. We have heard of great athletes who although strong, courageous, and hard working, turned to performance-enhancing drugs to push themselves into the next competitive level.

This reality most recently commanded our attention just weeks ago when Penn State University removed the statue of Joe Paterno outside Beaver Stadium, in the wake of the Freeh report that indicated that Paterno—and others—intentionally concealed reports of child sexual abuse involving Jerry Sandusky. This man not only held an outstanding record as a coach, he also donated millions of dollars of his money to develop the academic life of the community; his name still adorns the campus library. The two realities of Joe Pa are held together at once<sup>[1]</sup>. Yes, people are complicated!

King David is a complicated man, too. His career began as God’s anointed; chosen because of the state of his heart. He could interpret dreams and play the harp to soothe anguished spirits. He was a loyal friend, a charismatic leader, a dynamic worship leader, a steadfast follower of God. And in our text for today, we are reminded that King David is also a sinner, responsible for impregnating a married woman and arranging the murder of her husband.

We’ve heard the story before: of a King who stayed home during the battle season rather than leading his troops in war. Of a man, who noticed a beautiful woman who wasn’t his own and wanted her for himself. Of a person in power, who abused his authority over and over: by sending for another man’s wife, by lying with her, and then by arranging for her husband’s death.

The language of Nathan’s metaphor today puts the whole event into context. While others have tried to set the story in a different light to protect David’s reputation, either painting Bathsheba as a seductress, or heralding this story as one of star-crossed love, our text for today puts the story into God’s perspective. We see in the stark light of Nathan’s risky words that David “took” Bathsheba, who would have held no power herself as an Israelite woman confronted by the king. David used his power and wealth to have what he wanted in spite of the cost. And through Nathan’s words, David sees the truth: he is a thief, a rapist and a murderer: “I have sinned against the LORD.”

David’s behaviors reflect both personal and systemic sin, both about how one human being can harm another, and also how those in authority can utilize the system to abuse another. David does it all. This scenario highlights that sin, too, is complicated—



multilayered, convoluted—and sin has consequences. His house will be a house of bloodshed, for he has spilled the blood of Uriah the Hittite. David will be publicly shamed, and his own wives taken from him by other men from within his household and paraded before his people. And finally, in a disturbing end to this story, the child born from Bathsheba and David will be struck with an illness and eventually die.

But even though there are very real ripple effects to David's sin, confession has power all its own. In David's story, we hear his confession through the simple words of our passage, "I have sinned against the LORD," and through the complex prayer of confession of our Psalm. Confession is the turning point of the story, moving from deception to truth-telling; from death to life. There is a substantive shift when the one who tried so desperately to hide sin after sin, speaks with his own lips the truth of the situation and states plainly that he has sinned.

We know from experience that truth telling on the part of the "sinner" holds a whole different meaning from the truth that is told by the one who has learned of the sin. Somehow confession matters. Even though we don't, as Presbyterians, hold confession as a sacrament, we know that it is critical for a heart to reorient itself away from sin and toward truth; away from self-aggrandizement and toward God and community. Confession matters.

In the book *Blue Like Jazz*, Donald Miller tells the story of a confessional booth that he and some of his Christian friends built on the campus of Reed College during a festival week when they were students. They dressed in monk's robes, and Miller smoked a pipe, and people could enter this booth for a time of confession. But when students entered the confessional after a night of partying, they learned that they were the ones hearing the confession. He writes his explanation to Jake, the first student to stop by the booth:

"The thing is, we are followers of Jesus. We believe that he is God and all, and He represented certain ideas that we have sort of not done a good job at representing. He has asked us to represent Him well, but it can be very hard."

"I see," Jake said.

"So there is this group of us on campus who wanted to confess to you."

"You are confessing to me!" Jake said with a laugh. He looked at me and told me I didn't have to. I told him I did, and I felt very strongly in that moment that I was supposed to tell Jake that I was sorry about everything.

He went on to say, "Jesus said to *feed the poor and heal the sick*. I have never done very much about that. Jesus said to *love those who persecute me*. I tend to lash out, especially if I feel threatened, you know, if my ego gets threatened. Jesus did not mix His spirituality with politics. I grew up doing that. It got in the way of the central message of Christ. I know that was wrong, and I know that a lot of people will not listen to the worlds of Christ because of people like me, who know Him, carry our own agendas into the conversation rather than just relaying the message Christ wanted to get across. There's a lot more, you know."

"It's all right, man," Jake said, very tenderly. "I forgive you." And he meant it.

Miller writes about how he and his friends confessed to their classmates until around three in the morning. They set up another station, as their confessional became a place of shared dialogue; of acceptance, of transparency, and of change.



It is important to name the truth of our experiences, and even the contradictions of our identity. A four-year-old recently told me, "I try to be good, but sometimes I do bad things." He named the inner struggle that we all have: where we try to be good, but sometimes we do bad things. It is hard and complicated. We sometimes surprise ourselves with our actions and with the choices we make in desperation or greed or fear or confusion. But naming this struggle is a healthy starting point, and confessing one's sin is the necessary step toward living into the fullness of life that God desires for us, and turning from the behaviors that bring us and others down.

I returned yesterday morning from our synod's Trinity Youth Conference (TYC), where I served for a week as a workshop leader. This conference is for high school students who have completed 9<sup>th</sup> grade all the way through college-age students who have graduated from college. This conference honors that this transitional time in students' lives is full of complication and contradiction, of experimentation and exploration, of loss and of gain. TYC tries to create space for truth-telling within the context of our faith, so that students can see their lives within the context of the Gospel, and be nourished in a community of faith, hope and love. Throughout the week, some students named the truth that drugs had a hold on their lives, while others named the truth that they were deeply lonely. Some named the truth of the strain that responsibilities had on their lives, from academic pressures to the need they felt to step up and stop abuse in the lives of their families and friends. Being able to share these truths in a community of faith lightened their load, and the promises of our faith: of a future with hope, of God's gracious love for us in Christ, of God's cleansing of our sins in our baptism and God's call on our hearts through the power of the Spirit sent us all, campers and staff alike, into this world with renewed spirits and with deepened faith.

Some of us feel uncomfortable with such transparency. Some of us are uncomfortable with language of sin and even with language of confession. We don't like language of "total depravity" or bondage to sin and death. But if we think that is all there is to confession, we've missed the point. Confession is not a practice meant to mire us in the mess of our sinfulness. It's not meant to bog us down with an identity focusing on our bad side. Quite the contrary. Confession is an opportunity to be cleansed, to be released from that which is bogging us down in life and to get back on the path of hope God has for us. Through our confession we are freed from the weight of our sins, of the spiral of our negative choices, of the identity we get stuck with through the ways we harm...and then to live into the fullness of life that God intends for us and our identity as God's beloved children. While confession doesn't relieve us of the past, it helps break the hold that sin has on the story, creating a new possibility for moving forward in love.

It is confession that gives us boldness in our faith, for we remember that we are more than sinners. We are redeemed by God's gracious love for us in Christ. It gives us confidence to worship with joy, to approach the Communion Table, even when life is difficult or confusing and we're not feeling like ourselves. It is an opportunity to claim the affirmation of our faith: In Jesus Christ we are forgiven. Praise God!

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[1] Van Natta, Don, Jr. "Joe Paterno Statue Taken Down." ESPN News Online. July 23, 2012.

