

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 13, Year B (track one)

First Reading

2 Samuel 11:26–12:13a

When the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband was dead, she lamented over her husband. And 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. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him.” Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, “As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and 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! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. And I gave you your master’s house and your master’s wives into your arms and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. 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, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.’ Thus says the LORD, ‘Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun.’” David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.” (ESV)

Second Reading

Ephesians 4:1–16

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager 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 that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Therefore it says,

“When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,
and he gave gifts to men.”

(In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 6:24–35

So when the crowd saw that Jesus was not there, nor his disciples, they themselves got into the boats and went to Capernaum, seeking Jesus.

When they found him on the other side of the sea, they said to him, “Rabbi, when did you come here?” Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal.” Then they said to him, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” So they said to him, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’” Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who

gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.” They said to him, “Sir, give us this bread always.”

Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Our reading from 2 Samuel this week is strangely truncated. We have the first half of verse 13, but the choosers of our lectionary decided to leave off the second half of the verse and the rest of Nathan’s response to David, so I’ll put them here to complete the text.

David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the LORD.” And Nathan said to David, “The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the LORD, the child who is born to you shall die.” Then Nathan went to his house.

In the parable that Nathan uses to get David to condemn himself, there are some significant differences between what the “rich man” does and what David has done. (apart from the obvious one that Bathsheba is not a lamb). Without going into them specifically, we can attribute these differences to the nature and purpose of the parable. It is called a “juridical parable” whose purpose is to elicit self-condemnation from the hearer. In order to work, it must bear enough resemblance to the act by the offender that when revealed, the offender recognizes themselves, but it must also be just different enough that the hearer does not see themselves too clearly on first hearing, lest they change their response to lessen their condemnation. So the absence of the killing of the owner of the lamb, the inclusion of the “guest” for whom the lamb was taken, these and other small differences are of the nature of this sort of parable.

What is interesting to me is the Lord’s choice not to kill David. He had declared that the man who did this thing “ought to die” and Nathan’s reply when David admits his sin is, “The Lord *also* has put away your sin; you shall not die.” I have spent a good while pondering why “also” is included in this statement from Nathan. Also? In addition to what? To whom?

Is the putting away of David’s sin in addition to the punishments that are found above. “In addition to all the things God has said will happen, God has put away your sin so

that you shall not die?” Or is it that God has put away David’s sin in addition to that of someone else?

I lean to the latter. I think there is a distinct parallel between the punishments for David and those of Adam and Eve. God said in the Garden that if they ate of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, they would die, and yet they don’t, but they suffer terrible consequences. So also, David has “despised the word of the Lord” and deserves to die (both of his offenses were capital offenses, adultery and murder, not to mention the rape of Bathsheba which I discussed last week) but God has put away that sin while declaring terrible consequences for him.

Why was David not killed? Why does God “put away” his sin and still leave in place the terrible punishments that are to follow? I’m not sure, but here is my take. It helps to remember that this is all written in the hindsight of post-Babylonian captivity. It is written in a time during which there is no longer any monarchy, any hint of the Davidic line. David’s survival and his misery then serve as a constant reminder to the people that they do *not* want another king, for this is what kings do, and this is the disaster they bring.

If you’ll recall this post-exilic author (“P” the priestly author) prefigured David’s fall and that of the entire monarchy back in Proper 9, when he makes reference to “the lame and the blind” taking Jerusalem. Neither Saul’s line (Mephibosheth, who is lame) nor David’s, (Zedekiah, who is blinded) will be fit to dwell in “the house,” that is, the palace. Where the Deuteronomist emphasized the Temple in Jerusalem alongside the monarchy as sources of identity, the Priestly source (post exilic) emphasizes only the Temple. Our reading from 2 Samuel this week contributes to the author’s attempt to undermine nostalgia for the monarchy and place confidence in that which may yet be salvaged, the Temple.

Second Reading

Oh, boy. I’m not sure you’re going to enjoy reading this one. If it gets too obscure, skip to the last section (which I’ll mark), where I’ll try to sum it up, but I don’t think the summary will make much sense without some preparatory information.

And by way of preparation I’ll begin where I plan to end. I see all of this section of Ephesians as text driven by Paul’s desire to see unity in the church in Ephesus. It begins there, “...eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” and ends there, “...until we all attain to the unity of the faith...” Now to the nitty-gritty.

There is a significant difficulty with our translation of this passage, and strangely enough it could almost all be corrected with the addition of a comma. Most translations since the middle of the 20th century have translated verses 11 and 12 in ways similar to our text from the ESV, “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.” So also the text you’ll likely hear on Sunday from the NRSV reads, “The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”

The difficulty is that this translation makes it sound as though the offices of the church named at the beginning are there+ to “equip the saints for the work of ministry.” But that’s not what it says. This would read much more accurately if we simply inserted one little comma.

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints (insert comma here) for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

This is in no way meant to suggest that Paul does not see a role for every Christian in living out and carrying the Gospel, but that in this passage Paul is describing three distinct and parallel purposes for the persons gifted with the offices listed in the phrase that comes before. Their task is to 1) to equip the saints, 2) to do the work of ministry, and 3) build up the body of Christ.

Paul then goes on to give a threefold description of the role of the church, with three more phrases. “until we all attain a) to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, b) to mature manhood, c) to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”

The mistranslation that began in the 50’s revolves around the question of whether or not the prepositional phrases I numbered 2 and 3 are to be read as parallel or equal to 1, or dependent on it. If you read them as dependent, the offices of the church are to “equip” the saints *for* the tasks that follow. If you read them as equal, the offices are to do those three things. Too much of the argument for the dependent reading rests on the difference in prepositions. 1) uses *pros*, 2) and 3) use *eis*. This suggests to many modern translators that the second and third cannot be read equally, but this assumption is simply not supported by the use of *pros* and *eis* elsewhere in the Bible or in non-Biblical Hellenistic Greek. They were used pretty much interchangeably.

The dependent translation also founders on what is meant by the word translated “ministry,” *diakonia*. That word is too often assumed to refer to a lowliness of service, and yet no deacon I know perceives their work that way. Yes, they serve, but all Christians serve. They are ordained to proclaim, to proclaim the Gospel within and without the Church, and this is how the word *diakonia* is used in the New Testament. It refers to proclamation in one sense or another. This then makes “the work of *diakonia*” a much better parallel to the first prepositional phrase than a dependent one.

Finally, we do well to listen to someone who spoke Hellenistic Greek and preached on these verses from Ephesians. That would be Chrysostom. In his Sermons on Ephesians he clearly read those three phrases as parallel, as all referring to the “the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers.”

Pick up here if you want to skip the messy part.

It is easy to see why, as the church struggled to throw off some of its authoritarianism, translators chose to give us a translation that emphasized the ministry of all believers, but it seems clear that they did so at the expense of the real meaning of the text. By the addition of a simple comma, we can see that Paul saw those three functions as those for which the church was given “the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers.”

But even if those tasks were seen by Paul as belonging to those offices, it does not mean that he saw the other members of the church, the other members of the Body of Christ as having no work to do. We are to attain to, “ a) to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, b) to mature manhood, c) to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”

And here we refer back to one of Paul’s two major concerns in Ephesians, the unity of the church. Remember, we are not reading Paul in a vacuum, as though he were writing a systematic theology for the whole church in every moment. He writes to a church that has a particular problem with unity, and this continues to drive his arguments. So he wraps up this portion of the letter with this admonition, “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.” He describes a body, one body, with each muscle and joint doing its part, building itself up.

Gospel Text

Our reading this week from John 6 follows closely on the reading we had last week, involving the feeding of the five thousand and Jesus' walking on the water. It is the opening of what some scholars have called the "Eucharistic Discourse." While the discourse that follows doesn't describe the rites of the eucharist, (it lacks any reference to wine/blood), in it Jesus still speaks of eating of the bread that is His body, the bread that will give the recipient "eternal life."

It frustrates me that this speech of Jesus' is treated by almost everyone I read as though it were the invention of the author of the Fourth Gospel, while they will gladly take as "canon" the words of the institution of the Eucharist in Paul. It seems that, because John is considered to be much later (though I don't agree) this must be some later reflection on Jesus and the Eucharist by the Johannine community. There are two reasons that I would dispute this.

First would be that Jesus' words at the Last Supper are considered as being His. Why would it be so unlikely that he'd have spoken similar words in the aftermath of the feeding of the five thousand? Jesus likens the bread that He has given to the bread/manna of the wilderness. He then goes on to describe the bread in words that are quite like those we hear from Paul. There is no reason, apart from academic habit, to write them off as the product of the evangelist.

A great deal of this determination to ascribe words like these to John and not to Jesus seem to come from the assumption that John is the latest Gospel, but the assumption that John is the latest Gospel seems to come largely from the difference in the things that Jesus teaches and says. The argument is circular. There is an interesting book chapter I'll link at the bottom of all of this that you might want to read if you are curious about the dating of the Fourth Gospel. It's a long read, and I still differ with many of the author's assumptions about what is and what is not from Jesus, but it may help to open your mind to the possibility that John should be dated much earlier than it almost always is.

The other major reason I'd see these words as original to Jesus is that they are very "difficult." Bill Johnson, preacher I dearly love, is fond of calling this discourse "the worst sermon ever preached." At the conclusion of it, John tells us, "After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him." This was one of those sermons that empties the church. At this point I'd like to call our attention back to the dual purpose of the Fourth Gospel. That is, it was intended to build the faith of those *within* the church (in Ephesus) but it was also intended as an *evangelical tool*. It was intended to help bring people to belief in Jesus as the Christ. "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these

are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” (John 20:30–31, ESV)

Given this, it is *extremely* unlikely that the evangelist would have invented such difficult words. Rather, he’d only have included them if he believed them to come directly from Jesus. He acknowledges that they’re hard words, and gives us the disciples’ response when asked if they too will now walk apart from Him. “You have the words of life.”

Given that, I think it’s worth treating these words as being from Jesus of Nazareth, not John the Evangelist. And that leads to the obvious question, “What does this tell us about Jesus’ self perception?”

[Here’s the link to the book chapter I mentioned above.](#)