

Honoring a difficult relationship

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My husband came home one night confused and needing to talk. A friend of his had blown him off at work, and Dan couldn't figure out why. "I was standing there, waiting to talk to him, and he just walked away!" My husband was hurt and remorseful.

So we tried to discern what he might have done or said to upset this friend. We ran through lots of scenarios but couldn't come up with anything conclusive. Finally, I suggested Dan simply go and talk to him. If he valued the relationship, the best way forward was to be honest.

I approach my relationship to scripture in the same way. In my *Century* lectionary column for this week, I struggled with this text from 2 Samuel. David comes off as a complete wretch. His army is away doing battle on his behalf, but he has stayed behind so he can lie on his couch all day and peruse the beautiful women bathing outside his palace. Gone is young, ruddy, shepherd-boy David, the one who valiantly fought off the Philistines and refused to kill King Saul (who wanted to kill him!). Now it seems that David has turned into a fat sloth, hand-fed by concubines and having sex with whomever he pleases.

And that's not all. I'm also angry with the author here for his literary choices. He spends only one verse on the rape of Bathsheba. It happens quickly, quietly, without struggle or complaint. Two chapters later, when Amnon rapes Tamar, the same author highlights the struggle. Tamar's "No!" is heard. Why isn't Bathsheba's?

The Bible includes lots of difficult passages that I would like to avoid. I try not to, though, because I don't believe this honors my relationship with my sacred text. I am committed to giving scripture authority in my life not by running away from it, but by engaging it, thinking critically about it, and being honest with it. The same could be said for the way the text engages me.

So I give it every chance to do so. I have long been influenced by Anna Carter Florence's tips about working with scripture (in *Preaching as Testimony*). Just like her seminary students, I carry Florence's signature large, blank artist's sketchbook with me wherever I go. On its thick, white pages I have carefully penciled out the passage verse by verse. This methodical process slows me down and helps me pay better attention. The awkward heft of the sketchbook in my bag reminds me of the scripture's presence while I wait in the dermatologist's office, eat lunch in the college cafeteria, or sit in the bleachers at my son's baseball game.

With the text accompanying me everywhere, opportunities for honest dialogue arise. My feelings and frustrations about David and the author of 2 Samuel come out, and I respect the text enough to hear things from its side.

I come to understand David as representative of all that can go wrong when humans insist on making a man their king. I still struggle with David's wretchedness, but I can accept the broader point. As for the author's choice about Bathsheba--well--I appreciate being heard. This is not my only objection to the way women are treated in the Bible.

But such disagreements do not make me want to give up on this relationship. They make me want to engage scripture all the more. Because only in this authentic give and take can God's word truly be discerned.