

Sunday, August 5, 2012: 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a

by [Joshua Carney](#) in the [July 25, 2012](#) issue

Like many parents, I've ingested my fair share of *VeggieTales*, and I confess that I have a favorite: the episode in which Larry the Cucumber plays King George, who has an irrational fondness for his outsize collection of rubber duckies.

The story is an allegory of King David and Bathsheba. George peers out the window of his palace and sees Junior Asparagus taking a bath with an irresistible rubber ducky that George decides he must have. So George sends Junior to the front lines of a battle where Junior is obliterated by blueberry "bullets." The ducky now belongs to George.

Enter Pa Grape, a piece of fruit voiced by Phil Vischer, who sounds a lot like James Earl Jones. When Pa Grape tells George a story about a man who's misused his power and pilfered sheep, an outraged George is ready to wield his power in the name of justice. Then the bomb drops. Pa Grape announces: "You are that man." There is something haunting about this announcement, even in the veggie version.

Like George and King David, I have plenty of weaknesses and potential for sin myself. Lest my sermons take a turn for the worse and my church find the need to oust me, I plan to be ready when a job interviewer asks, "What are your strengths and weaknesses?" So I keep a running list of weaknesses in my head so that I can answer with honesty and in a meaningful way. I've realized that I can't use the typical response: "Well, I tend to be overcommitted to work. You'll probably have to kick me out of the office in the evening." I have discovered that at the top of my list is "I have difficulty telling people no," along with "I hate conflict." At the same time, I've also become aware that the church has an acute need for good confrontation.

I've served in three places over the past 30 years: Wisconsin, home of Packers and beer; "Minnesota Nice"; and Waco, Texas, the unofficial buckle of the Bible Belt. Healthy conflict has been in cultural short supply in all of these places—and yes, in congregations too. I've had a painful and important education in how to deal with conflict.

In our church family, we have encountered issues like these: Should seven-year-olds stay in the sanctuary for the homily? Should we build a new building when we are surrounded by residents who are in poverty? Should the church's voice on political matters be heard? Which ones? What position should we take?

There is no shortage of diametrically opposed, passionate voices within our congregation on these issues and more. Having helped guide the congregation through some of them, I have learned that although conflict, at least in the short-term, can slow church growth, it also creates key opportunities for personal and corporate spiritual growth.

Then there are the personal conflicts and turmoil in which the pastor often plays counselor: "Is it really wrong if I sleep with my girlfriend?" "Can I date an atheist?" "Should we get divorced? "He's verbally and emotionally abusive."

As a new pastor, I had a difficult time telling people what I thought they needed to hear. To make matters more interesting, I was haunted by postmodernism, which teaches us to be careful about making definitive statements. Don't get me wrong; I think a good dose of epistemic humility could do us all some good, especially us Baptists in the South. Yet even in the most ambiguous of moral environments I find that the Holy Spirit will whisper the truth of the matter in my heart. Often, in a setting much less stately and glamorous than a king's throne room, I must tell a King David sitting across from me, "You are that man." Even more painfully, sometimes those in my life announce to me, "You are that man."

Truth telling can be hard, painful work, but it is also holy work. We need truth tellers in our life.

I suppose that a large reason that confrontation has become even more difficult is because we've lost the theological language to describe what is happening our lives. When I first got a copy of Barbara Brown Taylor's *Speaking of Sin*, I was intrigued by the title of chapter two: "Sin Is Our Only Hope." Taylor states that in the medical community sin is referred to as "sickness," and the law calls sin "crime." The church must call sin what it is: sin. Only then can we understand properly what is wrong and how God can make it right. Confronting sin as sin is our only hope for restoration.

I understand now why Pa Grape's words are haunting. His bluntness allows those who hear him to mend the existential crises that exist between God and us. When someone like Nathan dares to tell the truth we ought to be thankful; he or she is

doing us a great service. We must cultivate that voice within our communities—the voice of those who will invoke journeys of restoration. Truth tellers offer hope. Truth tellers change the hearts of kings.