

August 4, Ordinary 18B (2 Samuel 11:26—12:13a; Psalm 51:1–12)

There is no one who does not need God's mercy and no one who may not have it.

by [Kelli Joyce](#) in the [August 2024](#) issue

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“Your kingdom will not continue; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart; and the Lord has appointed him to be ruler over his people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you” (1 Sam. 13:14). These are the frank words with which the prophet Samuel announces to Saul the end of his reign over Israel and God’s election of David to rule in his place. And yet, in this week’s reading from 2 Samuel, we see that David, too, has failed to keep that which the Lord commanded him. He has sinned against the Lord in sinning against Bathsheba and her husband, Uriah; he has used his power to gratify his own desires at the expense of others; he has committed adultery and murder with shocking ease.

And even after all this, he apparently has no insight into the wrong that he has done. The arrival of a prophet of the Lord inspires neither fear nor introspection, and David is immediately prepared to cast himself in the role of righteous avenger in Nathan’s story, unable to recognize that he has already made himself its villain. There is a brilliance to Nathan’s approach here: by the time the word of God’s condemnation is made clear to David, he has already unwittingly acknowledged not only his own guilt but the grievous nature of his exploitation of those with less power than himself. There is to be no disputing the matter once it has been raised.

David repents. Psalm 51, that classic penitential psalm of Ash Wednesday, is his lament and petition to God for mercy.

Repentance, forgiveness, and mercy are difficult themes in our contemporary moment. It often seems that the possibility of genuine forgiveness for genuine transgression is, intentionally or not, excluded from the realm of the imaginable. There seem to be just two available options. Either a real act of wickedness has occurred, for which the offender is truly culpable and for which genuine forgiveness

is therefore either impossible or unjust, or else transgressions are reduced to ordinary but essentially benign human fallibility, unfortunate but not sinful, for which it would be unfair to expect any substantial penitence. And yet scripture unfailingly presents repentance and forgiveness as both possible and necessary.

David has truly sinned, sinned grievously. And while it may have seemed fitting to him in the context of prayer to identify his sin as being against God alone, it was not. David sinned grievously against Bathsheba. He sinned grievously against Uriah. He sinned against the men he made complicit in Uriah's murder. And yes, in and through and beyond all of these actions, he sinned against God. Psalm 51 is neither maladaptive self-flagellation nor a hopeless waste of breath in the face of unforgivable wrongdoing. It is the turn from seeing ourselves as the true arbiters of right and wrong to the recognition that we, like David, fail to act in accordance with our own values and with God's just commandments. That we, like David, do wrong to our neighbors in ways that have real human costs and consequences that cannot be wished away.

And yet it is also the recognition that we, like David, have always depended on the gracious mercy of God for our righteousness. God's mercy is true and unfailing; God's mercy is most active where the need for it is greatest.

"Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me." God's grace has always been a grace that both justifies and sanctifies. Salvation is both the forgiveness of sins that have been committed and the healing of the sinner by the Spirit's gift of a clean heart and a new spirit. Forgiveness insists on naming sin openly and refusing to accept it; it also refuses to allow sin to be the end of the story.

As with David, the consequences of our sin can and will continue to affect the shape of our story and the stories of those against whom we have sinned. Yet we can never place ourselves or anyone else beyond the reach of God's redemption. There is no one who does not need God's mercy and no one who may not have it. In the face of the world's injustice this may seem a dubious gospel, but it is good news. It is this promise of forgiveness that makes it possible for us to truly listen to stories like Nathan's without fear, to name sin wherever we see it, knowing that when the day comes for us to hear the words "You are the man!" we can return to the Lord and find not only forgiveness, but a new heart—one after God's own.