

For what it is worth, it was at Community Presbyterian in Coolidge that I “auditioned” for the search committee that is responsible for whatever harm I have done to this church in the past six years and three months. But in the sermon I gave that day, I told the only Calvin Coolidge — after whom Coolidge was named — the only Calvin Coolidge story I know. Basically no one alive now has any memory of him, but our thirtieth President was what is called on vocabulary tests, *taciturn*; a man of few — though sometimes profound — words, he would be a welcome change from most of today’s politicians.

At any rate, one Sunday President Coolidge went to church, and when he returned his wife asked, “How was church?” “Fine,” replied the man of few words; “What did the minister talk about?” “Sin.” “Well, what did he have to say about it?” “He was agin’ it.”

I mention that because aside from the very, very important observance of confession that we do every Sunday, which to me is an absolute necessary element of worship and, equally desired, of my — and your — everyday life, I do not talk much about sin in my sermons, as Laura Hoffman frequently notes to me. Part of this is honest humility, or perhaps embarrassment, and humility does not come naturally to me, but I would probably do a better job of telling *how* to sin rather than of railing against it. I consider myself a very tarnished and chastened individual, trusting in God’s mercy and not in my own virtue, while trying to pursue a more virtuous life than through today I have led, because I am indeed so grateful to God.

But this week and next, as we deal with the story of David and Bathsheba, we are confronted with *sin*, including two of the worst of sins: adultery and murder, so I had better say *something*.

And of course, I’m agin’ it — agin’ *them*, — and I condemn them. While few are ever drawn toward killing someone intentionally, many are drawn to adultery, I suspect multiples of the number who are drawn to stealing or killing, and since in David’s case it was the adultery that led to murder . . . well let me back up and go over the story again.

David is on his rooftop and spies Bathsheba bathing. She is apparently quite attractive, and so . . . no; not “so”; I was going to say, “and so he *lusted* after her,” but *lust* was probably not his *first* reaction, at least from a twenty-first century perspective. But it was that *lust* that set off the whole train of events, his wooing her and bedding her and impregnating her, then determining that he must get rid of her husband, one of his generals named “Uriah,” in order to cover up his adultery, and so arranging his likely death, *murdering* him.

In other words, David’s sin started when his viewing of Bathsheba bathing turned to lust. In very simple terms, David’s troubles began not *because* lust arose, but because he failed to deal with it, to recognize it for what it was, and to recognize Bathsheba as a person — but that later comment is more appropriate to our twenty-first century understanding than it perhaps was to the writer of this story.

Lust. In “The Sermon on the Mount,” Jesus says, among other things,

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”¹

Now, in this Lectionary year we do not encounter “The Sermon on the Mount,” and when I do speak of it, I try to say that in a statement such as Jesus made, he is saying more than one thing. He is pointing out what Paul emphasized in Romans: No one is capable of fulfilling completely the requirements of the law, so let us put self-righteousness aside; Jesus is not defending adultery, but warning us against, at a minimum, *yielding* to lust!

Let me add, I do not believe that lust is a *wholly* voluntary *reaction*; there are animal tendencies within us. Not wholly voluntary, perhaps, but lust can certainly *lead* to voluntary action, as it did with David, *can lead to* if it is not recognized for what it is, which, our story involving Nathan suggests, David did not.

Now, in that same “Sermon on the Mount,” Jesus said,

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgement.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement.”²

And again, I believe Jesus is making a statement about the ability of humans fully to follow the Jewish Law, and specifically the Ten Commandments, but he is also saying that as *lust* can be a pre-cursor to adultery, *anger* can be a pre-cursor to injuring or killing another — as, for example, by slandering or gossiping falsely about the other.

And when a pre-cursor is aligned with opportunity for its satisfaction, we have *temptation!* *Temptation to sin, to carry out that lust, to carry out that anger.*

Interestingly, David’s murder of Uriah — I believe any judge would call it murder — David’s murder of Uriah does *not* appear to have arisen from anger; it may have arisen from the need to cover-up his adultery (Bathsheba was pregnant but Uriah had not been with her) or to facilitate David’s marrying her, either of which is related to David’s *lust, lust*, which I think is another form of *covetousness*.

Covet. Do we remember the wording of the 10th Commandment? the 9th and 10th in the Roman Catholic tradition?

You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

¹ Matthew 5:27-28 (NRSV)

² Matthew 5:21-22a (NRSV)

It is an interesting commandment in that unlike all the others voiced in “shall not,” it is not dealing with something that is wholly voluntary, just as *lust* or *anger* is not wholly voluntary, yet it is a commandment that clearly would have avoided David’s adultery and murdering.

And if most of us are of an age where physical lust may be more of a memory than a current enemy, I suspect the same cannot be said of *covetousness* in the form of *envy* and *greed*. We are not likely to be led to become thieves let alone murderers, and indeed, we are ourselves the party that suffers from our covetousness and greed; but we are unhappy because of something that another has and we do not.

Yet, if *lust* and *coveting* and *anger* are not wholly voluntary, how do we avoid them — or more properly, how do we *overcome* them before they lead to action best avoided? How do we overcome *temptation*?

And I think that there are three answers to this unhappiness, but sometimes they will work only in combination with one or both of the others, *though that does not mean that the overcoming is easy*: Let me attempt to offer them in somewhat of a logical order: (1) *Love God and love your neighbor as yourself*, if we can ask ourselves whether what we are *tempted* to do would or could hurt another, there is a decent chance that our sense of right and wrong can be engaged, and we can resist temptation, whether it arises from lust or some other form of coveting. (2) *Pray*; and by this I mean a general, consistent attitude of prayer in which one regularly confesses to God, because prayer is not just one’s self talking; in real prayer, during the pauses between the thoughts and words we offer, God does speak to us. If we are confessing some sins, *prayer* may offer us the opportunity of realizing that we are in danger of committing others, and help us to find the strength to overcome their temptation. For either of these methods to succeed, we must be able to *name the feeling, the temptation, for what it is, whether the product of “lust” or “covetousness” or “envy” or “anger.”*

In words of the ancient Greeks, *Know thyself! Know what you are experiencing!*

Because when we can recognize and name the nature of our thoughts and emotions, only then can we make a sound judgement as to whether to follow them, or to control them. And there is nothing wrong with controlling them; Donald Trump notwithstanding, it is not a virtue to utter the first words that come into one’s mind, nor is it a virtue to yield to the first emotions that arise in one, either.

But sometimes, we do not fully comprehend our thoughts and feelings, and then we need the third answer, (3) someone like Nathan, someone with whom we can share what is happening to us, what feelings we have, and know that while that person is going to warn us to arrest them or to overcome them, he or she is not going to condemn us for experiencing them. But we need an honest broker, and while sometimes prayer can do that for us, sometimes we need the assessment of another child of God who is interested in our well-being and in our doing right. I won’t mention but briefly because it is trivial in the context the marriage counselor’s response to my yelling at other drivers, but you get the point:

sometimes it is only another who can hold the mirror up so that we can see ourselves. Depending on the situation, that “Nathan” could be a friend, a counselor, even a pastor. The late German pastor, theologian, and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer to whom i so often refer, was a Lutheran, but he expressed the view that he thought maybe Protestantism had lost something when it abandoned the Roman Catholic custom of *confession*, because in confessing to another human being, sometimes we are forced to be honest with ourselves in a way that even prayer can evade.

When we can identify what we are feeling, whether *lust*, anger, greed, resentment or other covetousness, we can understand what the consequence of yielding to it can mean, and recognize it as a violation both of God’s law and likely to bring injury upon another. We have to be able to recognize that the fault lies in us, not in the other, and to the extent that “Love your neighbor” keeps us from anger and resentment at the other, great, but there is no easy “fix”; only with God’s help do we overcome these feelings, with God’s help granted us in repeated prayers for help in overcoming them — not in obtaining that which we covet, but in overcoming the coveting, — in repeated prayers, and in realization that what God has given us through the promise of eternal life is greater than anything we can covet or lust after on this earth.

I guess what I am trying to say is this: David’s feeling lust for Bathsheba was not itself the sin; our feeling envy or coveting our neighbor’s new car is not itself sin; it is letting that lust and that coveting control us so that we are prone to act in a way that is counter to God’s law and that could injure another that is the sin. If we can recognize our lust or our coveting, our anger or envy or resentment for what it is or they are, with or without the aid of our personal Nathan, if we can name it to God, and ask God for help through our prayers, then we can avoid the slippery slope down which David slid.

We can pray not to be tempted, but I think what we really mean to pray, what Jesus really meant was, for us to pray not to let temptation conquer us, not to yield, but to ask God’s help.

Sin? Sure, I’m agin’ it, but I am also susceptible to it. I might not completely avoid it, but with God’s help, it will not overcome me.

For God will help us. Has God not sent his Son to be our Savior? In His name we pray. Amen.