

“Blind Spots”
2 Samuel 11:14-12:7a
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

One of my favorite tv shows in recent years is the Netflix series, *The Crown*. It’s about the royal family in England, starting in the 1950s. Season One covers the time when Elizabeth became queen and Winston Churchill was serving for the final time as Prime Minister.

Toward the end of the season, there’s an episode in which a portrait of Churchill is being painted, in celebration of his 80th birthday. Churchill must sit on a number of different occasions with the painter, Graham Sutherland, and over the course of those sittings, the two men get to know one another better.

Before one of the sittings, Sutherland spends some time looking through paintings that Churchill himself has done. Churchill painted as a hobby, and one of Churchill’s favorite scenes to paint is a pond—the Goldfish pond on some land that he owns at Chartwell.

Churchill painted the pond time after time after time.

And Sutherland tells Churchill that he appreciates the honesty of those paintings of the pond.

But Churchill is stunned.

The honesty of those paintings? It’s just a pond.

“It’s such a technical challenge...”

That’s why Churchill says he paints the pond.

“...the water, the play of light, the trickery—it eludes me.”

He’s trying to get it right.

But Sutherland says he’s not buying it.

He thinks there’s another reason Churchill goes back to the pond over and over again.

Sutherland says of those paintings:

“Beneath the tranquility and the eloquence and the light playing on the surface, I saw honesty and pain, terrible pain.”

He says this as a compliment, but Churchill brushes him off, and changes the subject. He asks Sutherland about a painting that Sutherland had done, a painting that had its own foreboding side, with gnarled and twisted wood and great dabs of black.

Sutherland compliments Churchill on his perceptiveness, and tells him that particular painting came during a dark time in his life, when he and his wife lost their 2-month-old son, John.

This revelation opens something in Churchill. He shares with Sutherland that he too lost a child—a daughter, Marigold, when she was only 2 years old. And Churchill says, “Regretfully, though perhaps mercifully, I was not present when she died. When I came home, Clemmie [Churchill’s wife] roared like a wounded animal.

“We bought Chartwell a year after Marigold died. That was when we put in the pond.”

And then it HITS him!
He realizes that Sutherland was right!

He kept painting the pond again and again and again, over 20 times, thinking he was doing it because it was a technical challenge, when really—the real reason he was painting light on the surface and darkness below the surface of the pond was because of the pain below HIS own surface.

He returned to the pond as a way of dealing with the grief of his daughter’s death.

But he couldn’t see it.
He was blind to the real reason he was doing it!

Now I doubt that conversation happened in real life.

But even if the writers made it up,

it's a marvelous scene,
because, like Churchill, all of us have blind spots.

Reasons for how we behave, reasons for the places where we're most defensive, reasons for who we choose to love, and who we fail to love, reasons that we may never be able to see on our own.

Our topic this morning is blind spots.

Why do I raise this topic?

One reason is because of what happened in El Paso and Dayton last weekend. I assume that almost everyone in this room is deeply troubled and grieved by the events in those two cities. And I also assume that we ALL can agree, as Christians, that white nationalism, which served as a motivating force for the horror in El Paso, is a work of evil, and is a terrible offense to God's love.

I also suspect that almost everyone in this room already has pretty firm opinions about what the political leaders of our country should do, and what they should not do, because of what happened.

And I suspect that if we were to poll this room right now—
there would be a divide in this room,
on the subject of what our leaders should do,
just like there is a divide in our country.

And yet, as you know, it's not just the problem of how we respond to El Paso and Dayton that creates divisions.

We are, in many ways, a divided country right now.
Over immigration.
Over race-relations.
Over health care.

None of those topics are the topic of our sermon this morning.
But our sermon topic has bearing on all these issues.
Because this is a sermon about blind spots.

Do you have any blind spots?
I know I have blind spots.

In fact, let me extend an invitation to you. Coming through the line after worship today, you are free to share with me all the blind spots that you found in my sermon this morning. You have my permission, I won't stop you.

You see, this question of blind spots—it was on my mind before last weekend. It was on my mind earlier this summer, after Leigh and Mary Kathleen and I decided to do a sermon series on David. It was on my mind after I first looked at this text back in June.

Our story this morning is, according to many commentators, the turning point of King David's life.

In response to his sin with Bathsheba, David schemes to have her husband Uriah killed in battle, so he can marry Bathsheba and cover up his tracks.

As our text for today puts it, "...the thing that David had done displeased the Lord, and the Lord sent Nathan to David."

That's a gentle translation of the Hebrew.
A more direct reading might go like this:

"the thing that David had done was evil in the eyes of the Lord..."¹

How could David be so blind to the evil that was doing?

Maybe part of the answer is found at the start of chapter 11.
The story of David and Bathsheba begins like this:

"In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel with him...But David remained at Jerusalem."

A crucial phrase: "But David remained at Jerusalem."

¹ Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1999.

At the time when kings go out to battle, David did not go.
He stayed home.
He had become lazy, ready to let someone else do his work for him.

This is, perhaps, where David's BLIND SPOT begins.
He's no longer willing to do what he is supposed to do as king.

I'll let someone else fight the battle...
I'll let someone else take the risk...

Do you think that perhaps this is where our blind spots begin as well?

We may not be a king, and our calling is not to go out and fight the Ammonites. But what we all are called to do as Christians is GROW IN OUR FAITH.

To seek out ways to become spiritually UNCOMFORTABLE.
To look for those people and places and opportunities that might stretch us, helping us to become the people God hopes we might become.

And one of the ways you and I can do that is by searching for our blind spots. You see, the question of blind spots hasn't just been on my mind since last weekend, and it hasn't just been on my mind since the beginning of the summer.

It's been on my mind for years and years and years.
I don't know about you, but I AVOID my blind spots.

I don't enjoy discovering them.
I don't like learning about them.

Have you ever had a blind spot revealed to you?

Sometimes, it can be an amusing thing.

There was a time a few years ago when I was preaching a sermon, and I was trying to poke fun at myself in the sermon by admitting that I can be pretty clueless about technology, especially for someone of my generation.

So I had just started texting.
 Not in the midst of the sermon.
 I had just started texting in my day-to-day life.

This was about 10 years after everyone else was doing it.
 I was a little late to the game.

And was trying to learn how to use all the shorthand that goes along with texting, and I said something in the sermon about how I had texted one person “LOL”—you know, “Lots of luck!”

And there was a bit of whispering out in the congregation...

After the service was over, I had a few folks come up to me and say, “Uh, Ben, LOL doesn’t mean Lot’s of Luck! It means Laugh out Loud!”

So a blind spot with technology?
 Yes...that’s true for me.

What’s also true for me is that there are times when my blind spots are more serious than my technological incompetence.

I remember the Sunday about 11 years ago now, when I was on a continuing education trip in Atlanta and decided to worship on Sunday morning at Trinity Presbyterian Church. Scott Black Johnston was the senior pastor there at that time. He was preaching that Sunday, and in his sermon, Scott told of an experience he had once had with his good friend and colleague, Cleo LaRue.

LaRue, who is black, was pastor at an African-American church in a Texas.

Scott Black Johnston, who is white, went to visit LaRue’s church, and LaRue showed him around, took him downstairs to his office—where Johnston noticed that there were no windows.

The office was solid wall, all the way around—
 not anything HE would want in an office,
 so he asked his friend why he had an office with no windows.

And Cleo LaRue looked at his colleague,
 and he kind of shook his head in disbelief,

like—“Is my well-educated, PhD from Princeton,
 very enlightened, very good friend—
 is he *REALLY* asking this question??”

(Of course, as I heard the story, I too was thinking—
 why no windows?

Was it a small church? A poor church?
 Surely ANY church can afford to give its pastor a window...)

But Johnston didn't know, so LaRue went on to remind his friend about what it was like to be pastor of an African-American church not too long ago in our country.

About how MANY offices of African-American pastors were never built with windows, because something can get thrown thru a window—
 a brick, a bomb—

things that Scott Black Johnston would never have experienced in his own work in the ministry.²

Hearing Dr. Black Johnston tell this story, I was embarrassed that I had not thought of that reason either.

You see, I suspect that when it comes to the experiences of people who are, in some way, different from me—a different ethnicity, or people who are of a different income level than me, or people who are a different gender, or people who are of a different sexual orientation than me...

I suspect that there are at this very moment any number of blind spots in me.

The question is not whether you and I have blind spots.
 The question is what will we do about them?

² The story comes from Scott Black Johnston's sermon, "Wright or Wrong?" preached on April 6, 2008, at Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, GA.

Brene Brown writes “...we have to stay curious about our own blind spots and how to pull those issues into view, and we need to commit to helping the people we serve find their blind spots in a way that’s safe and supportive.”³

Of course, I didn’t wake up this morning and say, “Gosh, I hope someone shows me one of my blinds spots today.”

Which one of us wakes up saying that?

No one wakes up saying that.

Maybe, as Christians, we should wake up saying that...

You see, one of my fears about my own life of faith is that I might become like David.

I don’t mean the adultery.

I don’t mean the murder.

I mean that I might become blind.

Or that I have already become blind—to my own...

SPIRITUAL LAZINESS.

That I won’t do what I am called to do.

I won’t be where I am supposed to be.

I fear that I WILL NOT put myself in places that will force me to learn, to grow.

I fear that I won’t put myself in relationships with people who are different from me, and who might have something to teach me...not just about myself, but about God.

My colleague Karl Travis once said the following:

³This quote can be found at <https://brenebrown.com/articles/2018/12/04/leading-from-hurt-versus-leading-from-heart/>.

“I do not believe that Christian faith is first about taking stands on issues...It is first about standing with people. It is about loving people. Which is to say that the kind of love to which we are called is no Hallmark love, no sentimental love...

“It is a kind of rough and tumble love.”

“It loves people who have sinned, and it loves people who have been heinously sinned against.

“It loves people through whom shine glimpses of the Almighty, and it loves people so clouded with self that it stretches the mind to imagine light shining upon them at all, much less through them.”⁴

Maybe you’ve felt that way in recent days, or even recent years.

Because of all the shouting at each other that goes on in our society these days, perhaps it stretches the mind to imagine God’s light shining through THIS person or THAT person.

But maybe being stretched is exactly where God wants us.

Not so long ago, when we were living in Dallas, a good friend of ours put a message out to other parents in the neighborhood. She put it on social media, she sent it to parents of children at the same elementary school that her kids were going to.

She said she was hosting a conversation at her house about the use of guns in our country. She was hosting this conversation, she said, not as a way to advocate for her beliefs and opinions, but to listen to others’ beliefs. To listen to others’ opinions. And people came to her house, neighbors whom she knew, parents from the neighborhood, came to her house.

These parents were not all of one mind on the topic.

But they spoke with each other on the topic.

And they listened to one another.

⁴ As shared in a post on Facebook.

Our friend hosted that gathering as an act of faith.
It was a way of saying—you know what?

I may have a blind spot, and we all may have a blind spot on this issue, and we have to start talking with each other about this issue, and I want to hear what my neighbors have to say...so I'm going to open my door to my neighbors.

I was amazed at her faith.

Now I don't know if Nathan (the prophet from our text) showed up at that gathering at our friends' house.

But what if I told you that God is planning to send your own Nathan to you?
I don't know what he'll look like, what she'll look like.

But God just might be planning to send you Nathan.
Not to punish you.
But because God loves you, and cherishes you, and wants you to grow in your relationship with God.

When God sends Nathan, or someone like Nathan to you, will you open the doors to your home?

Will you open the doors to your heart?

(Amen.)