Missing the Point
Sermon for Sunday, August 5, 2012
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Jokes that require an explanation aren’t likely to get much of a laugh. And stories that are meant to make a point may surprisingly turn out to be too subtle; sometimes they can go right past the person who was intended to get the message.

Several years ago my wife and went to see a movie that probably deserved a larger audience. Titled “Courage Under Fire,” the film was set in the aftermath of the first Gulf War. It starred Meg Ryan and Denzel Washington. Washington played the role of an Army officer given the task of determining whether the character played by Meg Ryan—a helicopter pilot killed by the Iraqis—was eligible for the Medal of Honor. As Washington’s character interviews soldiers who witnessed the actions of the female helicopter pilot, the film provides flashbacks of the action as seen through the eyes of each witness. As might be expected, none of the eyewitnesses agree, and Washington’s character has to wrestle with the question of which story is closest to the truth.

While Carolyn and I were watching the movie there were sitting in front of us a girl who probably was a freshman or sophomore in high school and a man we discovered to be her father. When the credits began to roll and the lights came up in the theatre, we followed this father and daughter up the aisle. The conversation we overheard was fascinating. The girl was remarking to her father that she didn’t understand anything about the movie. “They kept telling the same story over and over,” she complained. Evidently she missed the director’s point in using flashbacks to tell the story. She also missed the subtle—and not-so-subtle—differences in each witness’s story as it was recounted in the film. This film, which I found riveting, evidently was nothing but a confusing hodgepodge to the girl. Her father looked exasperated. He didn’t even try to explain to her what should have been obvious.

I think of that father’s exasperation as he walks out of the movie theatre when I hear the story from 2 Samuel that serves as our Old Testament text for this morning. The exasperated person in the lesson has to be the prophet Nathan, who bravely confronts King David with the enormity of his crime against Uriah the Hittite, which was prompted by David’s adultery with Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba.

It was clear that someone had to speak up. Ordinarily the time of mourning among the people of Israel was a full year. But Uriah the Hittite was barely cold in his grave before Bathsheba finished lamenting her dead husband and had moved into the palace to become the newest—and very obviously pregnant—wife of King David. Tongues must have been wagging, not only in the palace but all over Jerusalem. People must have been wondering if anyone would have the courage to confront the king with his wrongdoing.
Nathan was the obvious man for the job. He was the king’s prophet. He had been David’s greatest supporter and encourager. He had the king’s ear and the king’s trust. But some people in Jerusalem probably wondered if Nathan would speak up. Perhaps he was too close to the king to broach the painful truth about David’s sin. Perhaps fear of the king would close Nathan’s mouth. After all, consider what happened to Uriah the Hittite.

But Nathan does speak, and when he speaks he tells a story—a little parable about a poor man with a ewe lamb that had become a family pet and a rich man with many flocks and herds. The rich man takes the pet lamb away from the poor family and cooks it for a guest’s dinner. When Nathan has finished the story, everyone who hears it gets the point. Everyone except David, that is! The king flies into a rage about the fictional rich man and his cruelty. He’s ready to issue edicts, to haul the offender before the throne. At last Nathan is compelled to state the obvious. He tells David, “You are the man!”

Nothing in the Bible suggests that David was stupid. Nothing suggests that David lacked insight. David didn’t rise from following the flocks to the position he held without a certain sharpness of mind. But David misses the point of Nathan’s story until the moment that the prophet rubs his nose in it, makes him stare the ugly truth in its face. David is not stupid, but David is like the rest of us. The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves often are a curious mixture of rationalization, wishful thinking, and cherished lies we’ve told so many times that they take on the veneer of truth. Jack Nicolson, in a famous movie scene, bellows, “You can’t handle the truth!” And like David, we employ denial when we can’t handle the truth about ourselves. David has pushed the enormity of his crimes out of his mind, blotted from consciousness what he has done, until the moment when Nathan bravely speaks the truth to him in a way the king cannot possibly avoid.

We may not be adulterers or murderers as was David. Yet we can be just as much in denial about the shameful things we have done in our lives. How wonderfully strange it is that we can react emotionally to a sad story, yet treat people around us with a coldness and a disregard that is in its deepest sense heartless. We find it possible to sit and watch a movie that tugs at the heartstrings—we may need to dip into a box of tissues as we watch the death of Julia Roberts’ character, Shelby, in “Steel Magnolias” or the plight of the stranded alien, E.T. Yet there are things we’ve said and done that we really ought to weep about and we shed nary a tear. We may weep for a lamb; we may weep for a character in a tearjerker movie. But things we really ought to be weeping about we somehow manage to push from our consciousness. We just don’t get it. We’re missing the point.

David is not the only person in the Bible who manages to miss the point. Our Gospel reading for today tells what happened on the day following the feeding of the five thousand. When crowds again gather around Jesus, the Lord knows why they have come and tells them plainly, “You are looking for me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves.” After Jesus warns them not to work for the food that is perishing, they ask what sign Jesus is going to give them so that they might believe he truly comes from God. These questioners may appear to be coy but what they’re really being is manipulative. Their real concern is not the validity of Jesus’ messiahship; their real concern is how to get another free lunch. Anyone who follows Jesus just to get a free lunch
has surely missed the point. These people are thinking about filling their stomachs. Nothing could be farther from their minds than the ministry that Jesus might provide for their souls. And they will prove to be nothing but fair-weather disciples. By the time we get to the end of the chapter, the crowds that thronged around Jesus when he was multiplying the loaves and fishes have melted away.

A joke that requires an explanation isn’t likely to get a laugh. A story that goes right past someone isn’t likely to get its message across. And a miracle that has to be repeated because people simply wanted another free lunch can’t accomplish its end of drawing people more closely to God. In every case the intended recipients miss the point. The humor is lost on them, the instruction that the story may have offered is lost on them, the blessing and miracle are lost on them.

Every day the grace of God is being poured out on all of us in a variety of ways. Yet most of the time we’re a lot like David or the people who followed Jesus on the day after he fed the five thousand. We’re so wrapped up in ourselves and in our denial that God’s messages, God’s miracles, and God’s blessings go right past us. We do not acknowledge their source nor do we acknowledge their import for our lives. Yet once in a while someone like Nathan comes along, someone who forces us to look—really look—at God’s message for us, and to hear—really hear—that which we were unable to hear before.

Maybe that once in a while is this present moment.

Do you get the point?