Sermon of July 30, 2006  
Dr. Jim Standiford, Senior Pastor

“LIMITLESS GREED, LIMITLESS GRACE”

2 Samuel 11:1-15  
John 6:1-21

Eternal God, pour out your Spirit upon us,  
that we might be sensitive to your presence,  
attentive to your Word,  
and faithful always to your way.  
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray. Amen.

A woman was heard to say, “I love going to the dollar store because I don’t have to get dressed up like when I go to Wal-Mart.” She must frequent a different Wal-Mart than the one I know. But her attitude is not just confined to a particular clientele, many of us want as much as we can get with as little effort as possible. Seneca said, “The most grievous kind of destitution is to want more in the midst of wealth.” Horace said, “The covetous man is ever in want.” Leonard Capsman, the very successful writer and producer of the old TV show “Dallas,” claimed his show’s success was based on the fact it centered on four ingredients, greed, wealth, fame and sex.

We see all four of those elements in the life of King David of Israel. David is remembered as a man of extremes. He was extremely successful as a king, uniting Israel and Judah, defeating the Philistines, and establishing Jerusalem as a political, religious, and economic center. Yet David was extremely sinful as well. Our lection today from 2 Samuel is a pivotal passage in the David saga. Last week’s story of David trying to control and domesticate God is prelude to this week, where David goes completely overboard in violating the law and the will of God.

This account is a part of an ancient source which predates the Deuteronomic historian. This source is sometimes called “The Throne Succession Narrative” or “The Court History of David.” Its author is an exceptional writer, the master of the understatement. Notice how he starts, it could be the first line of a suspense novel: “In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab with his officers and all Israel…” Verse two is equally alluring: “It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch and was walking about on the roof of the king’s house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful.” There may be hints here about the king’s emotional state, but at the least is it imaginative writing.
This is a classical story of the arrogant misuse of power for personal whim. It is a story of limitless greed. However, within the account of David is a snapshot of Uriah, who exhibits limitless grace. David brings Uriah back to Jerusalem from battle expecting him to spend the night with his wife and thus conceal the adultery. But Uriah is absolutely loyal to the king and faithful to his soldier’s vow of sexual abstinence during times of battle. Even when on the second night David gets him drunk, he still spends the night on the steps of the palace with the servants. Finally, without looking at the message, Uriah carries his own death sentence back to Joab. Uriah, who is not an Israelite, is a witness to limitless loyalty and grace.

On the other hand David, king of the Israelites, is an example of limitless greed. It is amazing that a story so negative to such a great national figure has been preserved and passed on in the tradition. Interestingly it is not included in the writing of Chronicles. That it is included here is a testimony that the religious Jews are not about revisionism but faithfulness, learning even from the negative examples of their ancestors. The story of David’s adultery and murder reminds us of the deadly spiral of violence that can escalate from a single sinful act. This is the very reason Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, addresses attitudes as well as actions. John Wesley is one of the few theological voices that advocates for the possibility of an upward spiral of love and goodness with what he called the power of God’s sanctifying grace. Many are the voices that focus on the downward spiral of pain, violence and sin. Our thinking shapes our actions, positively and negatively.

The core of David’s willfulness is greed. He has so much but he wants even more. His greed leads to adultery and then to murder. This is a cautionary tale of the nearness of violence to those who live with power. As king, David had great power and thus great opportunity to abuse than power. However, the issue is not just one for kings. We all have power of one form or another. We all can choose to use our power for personal aggrandizement, or for the well being of all. David made the destructive choice, with one violation of another person, as bad as it was, leading to another violation that was even worse. Ultimately, because of his choices, violence comes to his house. (2 Samuel 12:10) You and I and David all live under the same call which is first recorded for us in Deuteronomy 6:5: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” Jesus said the way we love God is to seek everyone’s well being, including our own. We don’t get there by limitless greed. John White observed, “The god of greed is a cheat. His delights have the power to dazzle and excite but they can satisfy no one.”

After spending six weeks reading lections from the Gospel of Mark, we now read from John. Important in this story is the fact it is the time of Passover. Passover is the celebration of liberation, God freeing the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. John is telling us this is the way we experience true liberation, it is a gift from Jesus. This is a story of limitless grace. The setting is a very familiar and human one, hungry people wanting to be fed. Jesus asks rhetorically, how will we feed these people? Neither Andrew nor Phillip can answer the question. They say there is neither money nor food to feed the people. Often we too are oblivious to the real resources available to us. Even with an abundance of material things, we focus on what we don’t have; unaware of what abundance is available to us. At one time or another every kid that has ever taken lunch money to school is afraid someone will steal it and he or she will have to go hungry all day. The child in the story must have been moved to generosity by Jesus’ teaching. Jesus takes the boy’s lunch and uses it to feed the whole crowd. Jesus distributes the food himself. In the other gospels it is the disciples that distribute the food. Jesus is the bread of life as he says elsewhere in this gospel. He is the source of life-giving gifts. The twelve baskets of leftovers gathered after the people have eaten speak of the abundance of the gift that is Christ. The number twelve probably represents the 12 tribes of Israel. There is food enough for all God’s people. It is gathered up most likely because there are still others that need to be fed.

After eating the people say of Jesus, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.” They do not truly see Jesus nor do they understand who he is. Because he has miraculously fed them, the people want to make him king. They hope he will use his supernatural power and authority to give them a political and military victory by throwing off Rome. However, Jesus withdraws. He
will have nothing to do with such actions. He offers grace not to get anything, but because of who he is, the manifestation of God, God in human life. He will not allow his grace to be controlled by the crowd’s desire for national glory.

The story of Jesus coming to the disciples during the storm on the sea is not a tag on the end of the feeding account. Rather, it is a completion of the picture of his grace. Though he will not allow himself to be made king, he does not withhold his grace from those in need. He helps the disciples on the sea. The sea, an ancient symbol of chaos, is no longer threatening, for when Jesus arrives they reach the land toward which they were going. This whole account tells us Jesus is the source of life. Self-giving love is what truly feeds us and subdues the chaos of our lives. Jesus, and in turn God, is limitless grace.

Dr. Martin Accad, academic dean of Arab Baptist Seminary of Lebanon, reported this week, “Seven hundred thousand out of a total Lebanese population of 3.5 million, 20% of the total population, are now refugees, most of them Shites, and are being cared for by mostly Christian schools, churches, and humanitarian organizations. This is the Good Samaritan story on a mega scale.” It is limitless grace.

During a recent visit to Lansing, Michigan, Arun Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi’s grandson, said, “We are interdependent, interrelated, and interconnected. No country in the world can survive by itself if the rest of the world is going down the drain. The only way we can create security for ourselves is by creating it for the rest of the world.” Tribalism is rampant in our world today. There are many groups who are convinced that only their tribe is right and they will do anything they can to impose their values on everyone else. Yet, God has another vision, that of drawing all people together in shalom, in a peaceful well being for all. The psalmist writes, “The Lord is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds. The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.” (Psalm 145: 13b-16) Notice “all, all, all.” All in all God is limitless grace. Interestingly enough Psalm 145, from which these lines are taken, is attributed to David. David had the theory right, but his practice fell well short.

May we, slowly but surely, one day at a time seek the well being of each being including our own being, and thus fulfill the will of the Supreme Being. May we, by the limitless grace of God, do better. Thanks be to God. *

* Notes:


“The Throne Narrative Source” includes at least 2 Samuel 9-20, 1 Kings 1-2, and most likely parts of 2 Samuel 6-8. It is used by the Deuteronomic historian with almost no modification.

The Accad quote is from Sojomail, July 27, 2006.

The Gandhi quote is from Sojourners, July 2006, p. 49.