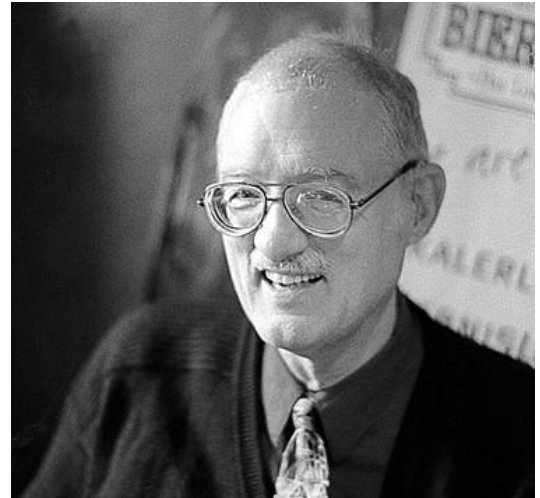


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Sermon for the Eighth Sunday After Pentecost  
 Holy Comforter Church  
 Charlotte, NC  
 Proper 12  
 July 26, 2009, 10:30 AM  
 Cycle B RCL

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 v:Π

And he wrote in the scroll saying, "Put Uriah at the forefront of the hardest fighting and [then] pull back from him so that he will be struck down and die." (2 Samuel 11:15, FLH)

I

Everything changed.

In one awful moment, everything changed for the king and for his people.

With a few strokes of a pen and a farewell, the king had sent the hapless Uriah off to his death with his death warrant in his hand, and everything changed. The king was now hopelessly compromised. There were secrets to keep, a royal scandal to deny, and an incompetent general in Rabbah who would keep his job because of what he knew. The king's political standing had now been purchased by blood just like the political standing of every petty dictator that ever ruled.

It didn't have to be that way.

If some other rich and powerful man had acted as despicably as David, there would certainly have been consequences for many. David, however, was the king. When David the king decided to murder Uriah in order to protect his royal reputation, the future of a whole people was endangered

It didn't have to be that way, but it was.

## II

In the Colony of Rhode Island on the 7<sup>th</sup> of June in 1731 a young Congregationalist minister by the name of Jonathan Edwards sat at table to sign a document that transferred ownership of a young woman known only as “Venus” from one Richard Perkins, a prosperous slave-trader, to the Reverend Mr. Edwards. The contract, still available for inspection at Yale University, described Venus as “age Fourteen years or thereabout,” and set her price at £80.<sup>1</sup>

Venus was not the last slave Edwards bought during his years of ministry, but she was his first. From the day of purchase forward, the status of the Edwards household rose within the social circles of Northampton, Massachusetts, where possession of one or more slaves marked out the elites of New England society. The good pastor’s demands for a salary increase from the town of Northampton and his possession of a house slave marked an upwardly mobile status for the young minister.

It is quite true that other Calvinist ministers had preceded Mr. Edwards in the acquisition of slaves, but most had not—either because they could not afford slaves or, in some blessed cases, because they were opposed to slavery. But the actions of these other clerics made far less difference to American life than Mr. Edwards’ acquisition of a child slave because Jonathan Edwards was the golden-tongued orator who led the American Colonies into the most characteristically American expression of religion, the Great Awakening. The consequence of Edwards’ purchase was that he perhaps unknowingly and unwillingly infected American religious life with the disease of slavery and racism. Race had to be off the American religious table during just the years in which the country might have resolved the inhumanity of slavery without a civil war.

## III

Neither Jonathan Edwards nor King David would have thought of their actions as having anything to do with matters of state or national conscience. While petty and personally demeaning, the treatment of Uriah and of young Venus could be called “lapses in judgment” or even “acts of wickedness,” but surely the circle of harm in them extended no farther than Uriah’s family or the unknown mother and father of Venus. The blemish belonged to the king, didn’t it? The faulty conscience should be Edwards’ alone, shouldn’t it?

Christian faith, however, sees below this balkanized morality, sees beyond it because Christ suffered and died to relieve us of the burden of our sin. We do not have to fear naming it as sin or be blind to sin’s far-reaching consequences.

It is certainly more than a private fault to hire illegal immigrants to work in your yard and then vote to deprive their children of public schooling or health benefits. Maybe not everyone is doing it, but we are in the process of creating a permanent slave class again.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth P. Minkema, “Jonathan Edwards’s Defense of Slavery,” *The Massachusetts Historical Review* 4:23-59.

It is more than a private wickedness to enjoy the titillating details of one governor's illicit romances while paying no attention to the plight of poor people in his state and in ours whose lives surely are infinitely more important than the seamy side of public officials.

So far, too many of us have been utterly content to enjoy our expensive health insurance while paying no attention to the 48 million citizens in our country who depend at best on charity and at worst on luck to survive the ravages of disease and old age most of us experience in comfortable moderation? On the last day, as we stand before the judgment seat of Christ, we will be in the presence of each of those millions we have condemned to a short and beastly life.

Yet if sin has consequences for untold numbers around us, in the mercy of the Almighty it is also possible for righteous deeds to have their own consequences beyond our intention and control.

The ancient rabbis understood this reality perhaps quite clearly.

R. Eleazar son of R. Simeon said: Because the world is judged by its majority, and an individual [too] is judged by his majority [of deeds, good or bad], if he performs one good deed, happy is he for turning the scale both for himself and for the whole world on the side of merit; if he commits one transgression, woe to him for weighting himself and the whole world in the scale of guilt.. (*Kidd. 40b*)<sup>2</sup>

The whole world, not just your neighborhood, not just Charlotte, NC, the whole world.

There's much good news here, the same good news the prophet Isaiah announced to the desperate people of Jerusalem:

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Come, let's hash this thing out, says the LORD. If your sins are like scarlet, they will become white like snow. If they become red like crimson, they shall be like wool. (Isaiah 1:18, FLH)

There is forgiveness for sin and the infinite possibilities of repenting, of changing our minds, and of turning around our selfish and hateful behaviors. Repentance can have—will have—as great an effect as sin because God set things up to work that way.

The good news is that in God's world our lives are important, from gestation till death. Not one person, not even Venus or Uriah, is exempt from the vision of a God who numbers the hairs on your head (Matthew 10:30 // Luke 12:7) or from the care of a divinity who feeds each bird of the sky (Matthew 6:26 // Luke 17:24) and clothes the lilies of the field in robes more beautiful than those of Solomon (Matthew 6:28-29 // Luke 12:27).

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<sup>2</sup> *Soncino Classics*, CD ROM (1998).

The good news is that we can this moment and this day, do something. We can make peace with our enemies. We can recompense those we've cheated. We can visit the sick and comfort the dying. Millions of sick children are sick and hungry. You can help feed and heal them today. It's not too late.

It is not too late to make the Queen City gleam with the joy of Christ if you decide to make it so. It is not too late to end homelessness here. It's not too late to instill healthy minds in healthy children. It's not too late to change your business plan so as to make the bottom line the welfare of everyone in your organization. While there is breath and life in you, it's not too late, and I promise, everything will change.

Amen