

Nathan: He Dared to Tell the Truth

[2 Samuel 11:26-12:15](#)

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

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If Nathan was King David's chaplain, he was anything but his lackey. For when the chips were down, Nathan went toe to toe with David and dared to tell him the unwelcome truth about himself. But let's not make him the patron saint of people who think it's their God-given right to point out everyone else's imperfections. Nathan was a master at speaking the truth in love, and he has a lot to teach us when we deal with a rebellious child or an obstinate employee.

Note, for starters, that Nathan appealed to David's good side, to all that was just and noble and fair in David's nature. Yes, David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. Yes, he had instructed General Joab to post Uriah, Bathsheba's husband, where he was sure to be killed. Yes, David had flagrantly broken the sixth, seventh, and tenth commandments. And...David was redeemable. His promise, though severely damaged, was not utterly destroyed. So when Nathan told the story of a rich man who stole his poor neighbor's lamb, he enabled David to get in touch with his own deep moral sensitivity, and then to repent of what he had done. "Before confronting his dark side," writes one commentator, Nathan "lets him see his good side."

When you confront someone with the truth, are you thinking, "You're a bad person and I'm going to shape you up"? Or do you think, "You are a worthy person, made in the image of God, and I hope we can both become even more worthy by confronting this issue together"? How you deal with an underachieving employee or a rebelling child will determine in large measure whether that person grows and succeeds, or shrivels and fails. Reminds me of the boss who said to his secretary, "I just asked Henry to pick up a newspaper on his way back from lunch, but he's so forgetful he may not even find his way back to the office." Just then Henry burst in the door. "Guess what, boss! At lunch I ran into Bill Jones who hasn't given us an order in seven years. Before he left I talked him into a million dollar contract!" The boss sighed and said, "What did I tell you? He forgot the newspaper!" Yes and next time he'll forget to ask for the order, too!

Nathan treated David not as a failure, but as a person of promise. Only then did he say, "You are the one who stole another's lamb. You are the one who had a man killed so you could take his wife for your own selfish, sexual pleasure. You are the man!"

What I want to know is, how did Nathan say it? What was his tone of voice? David Hubbard, the late president of Fuller Seminary, thought there was thunder in his voice. Here's what Hubbard believed Nathan was thinking: "That was my moment. The king had given me my opening, and I thrust my words at him like a sword: 'You are the man.'" With great respect for David Hubbard who was my friend and mentor, I disagree. I believe Nathan spoke those words with sadness mixed with hope. Sadness, because David had sullied his honor as God's anointed king; and hope because no sinner is ever beyond the pale. I get that notion from Jesus. When they brought Jesus a woman caught in the act of adultery, he said, Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And when they had all crept away Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go . . . and do not sin again." (John 8:11) Even though the rich young ruler turned his back on Jesus, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him," according to Mark 10:21. So there is always the promise of forgiveness, always the possibility of a fresh start.

Twenty years ago I attended a leader effectiveness seminar. It was there I learned the vital difference between the words AND and BUT in times of conflict. If I say to a subordinate, "You're doing a good job BUT you're not getting reports to me on time," that little three-letter word BUT negates everything I said about doing a good job. My employee will conclude that nothing they do really pleases me, such is the negative power of the word BUT. If I say instead, "You're doing a good job AND I want you to get your reports to me on time," my employee is more likely to believe my compliment and to accept my critique. The word AND doesn't nullify the good in others; it invites them to strengthen the good and thereby overcome the not-so-good.

When you find yourself at loggerheads with someone else, say AND instead of BUT. After all, God has been saying AND to us all our lives. After the Fall, when our primal parents were ashamed of their nakedness, Genesis says, "AND the Lord God made garments of skin for the man and for his wife, and clothed them." God censured their mutiny AND God covered their shame. Listen to Paul in Romans 3: "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus. It was to prove...that he himself is righteous AND that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus."

AND is a key word in the lexicon of grace. Make it a key word in your times of discord and conflict. Substitute AND for but. Let your voice convey sadness mixed with hope. For you too live by hope, hope in the magnanimous grace of God.