

act than cutting people out of our lives who do not see the same truths as we do. Surely God is at work inside our hearts and minds to help us reveal God's intention for the world beyond just bemoaning the state of things in our living rooms or preaching to the choir.

Shedding light, revealing God's ways, opens the path to what comes next—that is almost always the right path to take, even when it is a bumpy one, indeed. When David began to see the truth, he found out that there would be consequences for his actions. David learned that his own family would have to deal with the repercussions of the harm he had done for a long time. But after hearing all that, David said simply, "I have sinned against the Lord." There is freedom in those words. Being able to acknowledge sin, evil, shadows, pain, brokenness, injustice—that is the beginning of change. That is the point at which we realize something different is possible. That God wants to lead us into a different pattern of life, a different kind of world. And in fact, that God is already leading us there. We see in the passage how quickly the acknowledgement of brokenness led to that something new. Immediately, God responded: "Now the Lord has put away your sin." David was still accountable. But he was also loved and forgiven, free from his secret, and able to walk with God again.

God, the one we call Creator, invites all of us into creative expressions that reveal God's intentions for the world. Sometimes we're like Nathan, like the clowns, like the quilters, called to use our imaginations to shed light into situations of pain. Sometimes we are like David, on the receiving end of a word from God that reveals our own missteps. Always, we are the recipients of God's creativity. God is the one who imagined what seemed impossible: becoming human in Jesus, while remaining divine. The Word made flesh reveals to us the depth of God's love and the utter failure of humanity to live together in peace and in love. God continues to reveal God's love to us in imaginative ways: through the touch of water at the font, through the taste of a shared loaf of bread and a little cup of juice. God uses all kinds of creativity to shed light into our lives. To help us see the truth of who we are: yes, sinners who are all called to turn back toward God. But also, beloved children to whom God says, "the Lord has put away your sin. Let me lead you into life."

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

1 <http://www.neatorama.com/2007/09/03/clowns-kicked-kkk-asses/>

2 Shane Claiborne, "Ku Klux Clowns in East Tennessee," October 3, 2012, *Faith Forward*, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/faithforward/2012/10/ku-klux-clowns-in-east-tennessee/>

3 Shane Claiborne, "Ku Klux Clowns in East Tennessee," October 3, 2012, *Faith Forward*, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/faithforward/2012/10/ku-klux-clowns-in-east-tennessee/>

August 4, 2024

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

*"The Power of Imagination"*

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a

In 2007 in Knoxville, Tennessee, a group of white supremacists, including members of the Ku Klux Klan planned a rally in a downtown park. Though the group had the right legal permits, local Knoxville residents were rightly upset when word got out about what was going to happen in their city. They decided to respond. But what they envisioned was no ordinary counter-protest. They formulated a completely different kind of response. On the day of the Klan rally, from side streets and parking lots, a bunch of people with red shoes, painted faces, curly wigs, and red ball noses started walking toward the park. Some clowns even made their way on stilts or riding unicycles. When the clowns came near the rally, they began to hear people shouting "White Power." But the clowns "misunderstood" the message, time and again. "White Flour" they shouted, as bunches of clowns tossed handfuls of baking flour in the air, covering the crowds with a gentle white dusting. The rally kept going though, with racist words continually shouted into the park. So another group of clowns emerged. "Ohhh, white flowers," which they pulled out and shared with one another, cheering as they celebrated their message. Their parade didn't end there. They continued to oppose the message of hate with words of their own. They donned wedding dresses and began to call out "Wife Power," as they walked arm in arm down the street which had become the wedding aisle. Outdoing themselves, they even crammed in a make-shift "tight shower," trying to get clean under the stream of water.<sup>1</sup> As one observer put it, "The white supremacist group was so outmatched, upstaged, and overwhelmed [by the clowns] that they called it quits a couple of hours early."<sup>2</sup>

The clowns gathered that day to oppose evil. But their actions didn't just oppose what they were seeing and hearing. They *exposed* the rally-goers' action for what it was: racist; idolatrous; making a mockery of the image of God in *all* humanity. Those clowns were creative and ingenious. They went at the problem from an unexpected angle. And whether or not any KKK members changed their views, they did stop what they were doing.

They knew they had lost, at least on that day. And instead, the brightness of truth and light shined in that park in Tennessee.

The prophet Nathan did not put on clown shoes. But he too used creativity and a roundabout method to shed God's light into the shadows. David had done some terrible things: hurting a member of his own army and abusing the man's wife; lying about; then hiding the things he had done. David was bound up in sin that related to intimacy and murder and political intrigue. It was all bad news. And keep in mind, this was God's good guy, King David. Nathan knew all this. God urged Nathan to shine some daylight into the situation, so that everything could become clear. David needed to be accountable for what he had done. No more secrets, no more covert actions behind closed doors. It was time for the truth to be out in the open so that David could eventually be free to serve God again.

But just speaking words of truth out loud doesn't always have the intended effect. If Nathan had just come at David and plainly confronted him, we might not have this story to read at all. Nathan might have been punished, cast aside, or even killed. David's secret might have stayed covered, tormenting him and his household.

Instead, God invited Nathan to be creative. To speak on behalf of God not just with plainspoken words, the way we usually imagine prophets doing. But to use his wisdom, his relationship with the king, and his wits to lead David to understanding. Nathan needed David himself—the person in power, the one with the ability to make change—to understand what he had done. So he crafted the story of the poor man, and the rich man, and the one little lamb. His parable of the rich man's cruelty in taking the poor man's little lamb is what finally opened David's eyes. The story made it impossible for David to deny what he himself had done. Nathan shined the light so David could finally be honest about his life.

God's purposes were worked out through Nathan's imagination and wisdom. Which was a kind of prophecy. Though really, all he did was tell the truth. Speaking the truth, however we do it, is often an act of courage and faith, something we do by the call and urging of God. Sometimes we speak that truth in love and humility. Sometimes we may have to speak it with power and bravery. Truth-telling might come in the course of our relationships. Or maybe at our work-place. Or out in the world, where the challenges and brokenness in our society are close at hand. But so often, even when we feel ready to tell the truth as God is revealing it, we have to figure out how to actually be heard.

It's that creative spark of God that might be the key to being heard and understood. Our imaginations might be the way to live into our faith, to let the light expose what is hurting so that Christ's light can permeate

the world. Artists, storytellers, songwriters, composers often find that spark. Their imaginations reveal God's truth to us. They expose injustice or reveal hidden hurts. They tell the truth in a way we can hear and understand. So that we can then work toward hearing, forgiveness, repair, and reconciliation.

The AIDS quilt is one of those creative sparks that has revealed the truth to so many. Almost forty years ago, it helped show the truth: that people living with AIDS were not by nature sinners and that they were people in need of compassion and help, not revulsion. The quilt memorializes people who died from AIDS with a patchwork of squares showing names, images, colors, and stories. Today the quilt weighs 50 tons, includes 50,000 squares and includes dedications to 110,000 individuals. But it didn't start out that way. It started out as an idea among a small group of people in San Francisco who were worried that their friends who had died from AIDS would be forgotten. They were witnessing the aggressiveness of AIDS up close and wanted to bring attention to the disease, and especially remove the stigma associated with it. The quilt was an imaginative way to speak the truth about what was going on, when AIDS was still misunderstood and there was little help for those suffering. When it was unveiled for the first time in 1987, the quilt was larger than a football field and included almost 2000 panels. The public noticed; leaders, researchers, and activists began to hear the truth. World AIDS Day began the following year to raise awareness and funding for the cause. The creators of the quilt were eventually awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for its impact. Much progress in the fight against AIDS has been made since then. And still today, we are a long way from solving the epidemic, as it now disproportionately impacts people in Africa. So there are always new opportunities to speak the truth and to shed light.

The arts have long been a way to shed that light. From antiwar music to comedy to street art, there is something holy in creative methods that shake us out of our complacency and help us see when things are amiss in the world or in our own lives. Imaginative prophets can expose the truth and reveal what hasn't been clear to us before. Their methods, like Nathan's, help us acknowledge our own complicity, when we otherwise might fight against their proclamations. As author Shane Claiborne, who spoke in this sanctuary about ten years ago, wrote of the clowns in Tennessee, "The event is a great reminder that we need imagination as we confront evil, so that we do not mirror the hatred we seek to end."<sup>3</sup> As we notice evil and brokenness out in the world, what are ways we can respond with imagination? Surely there are more creative ways than yelling our own thoughts in all caps on social media. Surely there are wiser ways to