**Toxic Masculinity, Then and Now**

**Narrative Lectionary**

October 21, 2018

2 Samuel 11:1-5, 14-17, 26-27; 12:1-9;

Psalm 51:1-9 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Before I begin, I know many of you have been wondering how Brian’s neck surgery went and how he is doing. His surgery went well, and he is doing well, given the kind of surgery it was. I also want to thank you for all the prayers and support during this time. We have truly felt held by our church communities, family and friends old and new, here and around the world. So thank you.

One night while Brian was in the hospital I was there with my mom and her partner, and Jessica, our oldest son, Tyler’s fiancé. When it was time to go I gave Brian a kiss and said goodnight. Jessica commented to me, ‘that’s the first time I’ve seen you two kiss. I had asked Tyler if you ever kiss because I haven’t really seen you show affection with each other.‘ I replied to her, yea, that’s mostly because of our own homophobia of not wanting to kiss in public or make others uncomfortable. The historical lack of acceptance and prevalent heterosexism in our society, still can affect us. We don’t hold hands in public because there is an underlying fear that we could get beat up, or make people uncomfortable. I recognize this is my fear, and that it is connected to heterosexism, the assumption and expectation that everyone is or should be heterosexual, and homophobia, the fear and oppression of homosexuality. It is also connected to what we have been hearing more of lately, toxic masculinity. Coleen Clemens wrote an article on toxic masculinity, and identifies that before we can talk about toxic masculinity we need to clarify understandings of gender. She says: “Researchers have shown that there is [very little difference](http://open.lib.umn.edu/sociology/chapter/11-1-understanding-sex-and-gender/) between the brains of men and women. While gender identity is a deeply held feeling of being male, female or another gender, people of different genders often act differently, [not because of biological characteristics](http://www.liseeliot.com/pink-brain-blue-brain) but because of rigid societal norms created around femininity and masculinity.”  She then uses the definition of toxic masculinity from the [Good Man Project](https://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/the-difference-between-toxic-masculinity-and-being-a-man-dg/):

Toxic masculinity is a narrow and repressive description of manhood, designating manhood as defined by violence, sex, status and aggression. It’s the cultural ideal of manliness, where strength is everything while emotions are a weakness; where sex and brutality are yardsticks by which men are measured, while supposedly “feminine” traits—which can range from emotional vulnerability to simply not being hypersexual—are the means by which your status as “man” can be taken away.

It is important to note that we know that not all men are like this. However, all men can be influenced by it, learn about it, and accept or resist this form of masculinity. My own homophobia, my hesitance to kiss Brian in public, although we do kiss at airports now, stems from the latter part of this definition. A culture that has not affirmed feminine traits, which includes affection between men. The fear is that the violence and aggression from other men could be the response. As I’ve said before when we have a fear, we need to evaluate if it is based in reality and in many contexts, this would fear would not be, but one is never fully sure. I know I need to do more work to overcome this fear.

I imagine this is the type of fear that Bathsheba experienced in today’s reading. David upon seeing the beauty of Bathesheba, exercised his power and privilege to have her brought to him. There is no indication that there was consent in this exchange. Many translations use language such as telling his soldiers to ‘take her’ and bring her to him. Toxic masculinity unfortunately has been around for a long time. David, as a powerful king, was also a warrior and so is known for violence – indeed he should have been at war with his army, and it is odd that he is home. Bathsheba would have had that fear of violence if she refused him. As a consultant with the United Church Sexual Abuse Prevention and Response network, I have learned that when someone is in a position of power and authority over someone else, there is never consent in a sexual act or relationship. It is an abuse of power. This was the situation with David and Bathsheba, so even if Bathsheba was a willing participant, it was adultery (as the church has often framed it in the past) and an abuse of power. It is important to note that the story does not include Bathsheba’s perspective. As often is the case for women in the Bible and many stories over time and presently, she is silenced.

Bathsheba also finds herself pregnant following the incident and informs David about it. What is not in our readings, is that King David tries to get Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah to sleep with her when he returns from battle for a respite. David wants to find a way to cover up that it is not Uriah’s baby. But Uriah, is an honourable man and stays where his troupes are camped out outside the palace, believing it wouldn’t be fair for him to sleep in the comfort of his home, while his troupes are all tenting. So when that doesn’t work, David continues down his destructive path and plans to have Uriah killed in battle. Bathsheba as a result, loses her husband, and after the proper time of mourning is brought to David and marries him, and I would wonder whether she felt forced into the marriage as well.

The prophet Nathan then enters the story with a parable about a rich man and a poor man. The rich man who has lots of sheep, steals the one sheep that the poor man has, in order to feed a guest, because he did not want to use any of his own sheep for the meal. It is important to note here, that David had many wives and concubines, so there was no lack of legitimate options for him to satisfy his sexual desires, but he chooses to force himself on someone outside of his family and household. Nathan knew this and calls David out through this story. In this truth-telling, Nathan also takes a big risk, knowing that the King could respond violently toward him. However, David knowing he has sinned, confesses and Nathan shares that God forgives him, but that the child when born will die. Psalm 51, is David’s lament for all he has done wrong. God is gracious and forgiving. David however does suffer consequences for his actions, loss of his child, and later, loss of wives, and challenges within his household. He is also unable to build the new temple, because of the blood on his hands – that task is left for his son King Solomon, who Bathsheba was also the mother of.

The story can speak to us in our humanity. We may have ignored others to fulfill our own purposes or desires. We make mistakes or choose to do things we regret. The important message is of God’s grace and forgiveness. We are called to confess, and repent, turn from what we have done, to change our behaviour, and make amends. We may have been a victim of toxic masculinity or other experiences of abuse of power. We then seek to heal in the best ways we can, drawing on the support around us and calling the abuser to account when possible. Bathsheba it seems made much of her difficult situation – she was resilient. She had more children, naming one of them Nathan, possibly in honour of his truth telling, and helps her son Solomon to become king.

I imagine that you can look around this room or think of those you know in your lives and see examples of resilience. I know I can. We have many challenges in our life - death, disease and illness, surgery but many face them with faith and hope, drawing on the love and support around us to get through, and in that, we experience God with us. May we all be able to do the same.

Toxic masculinity has been around for millennia, and continues to be prevalent to this day, as we see it in the violent shootings, the war mentality, through the need for the #metoo movement, and in the US Presidents’ violent language and demeaning of women, and his protection of Saudi Military sales over concern for the death of a journalist. In the midst of this, there is much hope of change as well. From the young men whom are leaders in challenging gun laws after the Parkland school shooting to men who are taking a stand against sexual violence. We also are more aware of its impact on all of us, men and women, and we can challenge it. It is important to raise our boys to challenge the stereotypes of what it is to be a man, so that they are strong in their sensitivity, compassion, gentleness, and affection. May we also draw on the positive elements of masculinity and femininity for all of us, boys and girls, men and women together, that we may be whole and healthy human beings, created in God’s image, as God intended us to be.