

July 26, 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time: 2 Samuel 11:1-15

## **I don't want to identify with David, with this king who knows no limits. But why, pray God, does his arrogance feel so familiar?**

by [Teri McDowell Ott](#) in the [July 22, 2015](#) issue

The Bible insists that I pay attention to David, that I regard his life. But it disturbs me to do so. I am angry with David after he rapes Bathsheba. Even when he is told that she is the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah—a woman with a family, a woman of standing in the community—none of this matters to him. Bathsheba herself does not matter, beyond David's desire for her. Uriah doesn't either. This Hittite is a leader in David's army, and he remains loyal even when he is drunk. Uriah's uncompromising sense of duty highlights a stark comparison: a drunk foreigner is a better man than the great King David.

So I don't want to identify with David, with this king who knows no limits. David's appetite for more never ceases. He wants more sex, more power, more pleasure, more privilege, more control over life and all its circumstances. He wants it all and seems to believe he deserves it. Where does this arrogance come from?

And why, pray God, does it feel so familiar?

I want more too. I want more time to myself, more sleep, more money, better food. I want fewer calories but more dessert. I want a new car and a fancy computer. I want to travel (first class would be nice) and sleep in fancy hotel rooms. I want nice clothes and hot shoes and some product to remove the bags from beneath my eyes. I want more sex, though I'll need more energy for that.

My desire for more never ceases. This makes me cringe, because it makes me feel like David. I want to be better than David.

Finding myself in David is disturbing because his desires clearly lead him to a blind disregard for life. Bathsheba is merely another woman for the taking, Uriah an

inconvenient problem to be eliminated. A few verses beyond the lectionary passage, when Joab reluctantly reports that other officers were killed along with Uriah, David just shrugs these deaths off too. In his desire for more, life doesn't mean a whole lot. Not even his own—God certainly created David for more than loafing on the sofa all day. A royal waste.

I serve as a college chaplain. In this environment of accelerated development, questions of life—who am I, what is my purpose, what will I do—often arise. In the wake of actor Philip Seymour Hoffman's death, students discussed the ways we disregard our lives. Hoffman died of a heroin overdose, which (I learned in this conversation) is a drug that offers a high like no other. As I sat on an overstuffed couch listening to my students carry on about heroin's euphoric high, I thought, *Wow, that sounds really good.*

I remember that day well. My kids had been sick for a month, and I was just barely keeping up at work and home. I felt that if life were to throw me one more ball to juggle, the whole circus tent would come crashing down. The idea of putting life on hold for a little while—to go on a short, euphoric trip—was appealing. Not that I was that desperate—not even that I'd choose such a road to death. But I could see the draw.

I also disregard life in subtler ways. I might unwind at night with a smooth glass of pinot noir, which tastes so good I might have another. Or I might stop at Target, lured by its racks of faux-designer clothes, for a little retail therapy. Or I might raid the refrigerator at 10 p.m., dipping spoonfuls of ice cream into a container of vanilla frosting that I slap on an Oreo. These indulgences feel great in the moment, but the moment never lasts.

Too often we get sucked into the cultural mantra that we aren't really living unless we are living it up. But living is not all cookies and wine. Life has some hard and nasty edges. Real living means living with regard for all of life—even the painful, unpleasant parts.

My students got me into meditation. Initially my anxious self found it was a waste of precious time, a practice of doing nothing. But I came to recognize their need for this quiet, focused practice—and, eventually, my own. Two years later, ten or 12 students come sit with me every Friday afternoon. In the silence we focus on our breathing, and we practice real living, sitting with ourselves simply as we are. When

everything in my life feels as if it is coming loose, meditation grounds me. My mind has been well trained to escape, to flit off to the future or obsess over the past. Only during meditation do I catch my mind doing this and refocus it on what is real—my breath moving in and out of my lungs.

I've enjoyed this growing awareness. But meditation's most profound effect is how I feel it softening me toward others. It encourages me to bring close people I would rather push away—the disrespectful student, the patronizing older man, the disturbing biblical king. Holding these people in my mind, breathing with them in meditation, is revealing. I cannot help but see them as real lives—as good and bad, pleasure and pain, success and failure.

Even though I don't want to identify with David, the stark, honest way his story is told leads me to regard this arrogant king as utterly human—a complicated mix of good and bad. So I take David to the mat. I breathe with him in meditation. David breathed, too. At the very least, we hold that in common.

Real living leads us to regard all of life. I can't imagine desiring anything more.