

Doing things for God? (2 Samuel 7:1-14a)

David and Nathan both get it wrong, and so do we.

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I have a lot of ideas about what God needs from me: a new devotional book; a fantastic, child-friendly worship program; a new church parking lot; political advocacy; compelling more people to serve on committees. I could go on and on (and sometimes do).

King David has an idea about what God needs from him: a big, fancy house.

When you take a step back, of course it is ridiculous to think that we can provide something for the creator of the universe. But it's an easy trap to fall into. We can fall in because of our genuine desire to praise and serve God. We can fall in because of the ego boost we get in thinking that God needs us. There's definitely some pride involved in my own ideas about what God needs from me. And I know enough about King David to be pretty sure there's a lot of ego involved in his offer to build God a house. (If you doubt my assessment of David, just wait until next week's lectionary reading!)

Along with my ideas about what God needs, I also have a lot of guidance to offer others about how they relate to God. Just like the prophet Nathan, who is quick to offer spiritual guidance to King David: "Go, do all that you have in mind, for the Lord

is with you.”

Readers quickly learn, of course, that Nathan got it wrong. The Lord was not, in fact, with David in his desire to build the temple. Which makes me wonder how often I get it wrong.

Nathan’s instinct to affirm David likely comes from practical and political considerations—David doesn’t often respond well when people don’t go along with his plans. (Again: see next week.) My tendency to affirm people usually comes not from fear of what they will do if I disagree but from excitement that they are making an effort to connect with God at all. “Yes! Go on the retreat! Do the fast! Read the book! Do the spiritual thing, whatever it is!” Nathan should curb our enthusiasm; he stands as a reminder that it is always best to check in with God before speaking on God’s behalf.

Nathan’s quick affirmation of David’s ego-driven plan puts Nathan in awkward situations with both God and David. First he has to listen to God explain why David building a temple is such a bad idea. Then he has to go to David and tell him that actually, God doesn’t want a house. Or at least, God doesn’t want *you* to build God’s house. Ouch.

It’s to be expected that we, as humans, will sometimes—OK, a lot of times—get it wrong as we try to figure out how to be in relationship with God, how best to serve and honor our Creator. And for all that David and Nathan get wrong in this story, it is important to note that God does not condemn either of them. God reminds them of the divine presence with them in the past and assures them of this presence in the future.

I trust that God approaches me with that same grace in my own misguided efforts to build things—if not houses, then churches and programs and books—for God. And I appreciate that God does not reject all of our offers of service; Solomon will indeed be allowed to build the temple. Just because God doesn’t need something doesn’t mean God isn’t pleased we are willing to offer it.

I do wonder, though, if God really wants us to do quite as much as we think we need to do. I wonder if, instead of trying to do so many things for God, we might be called to more deeply appreciate what God does for us.