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 First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia
 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time, July 19, 2015
 Texts: 2 Samuel 7:1-17, Ephesians 2:4-9

From “If” to “Nevertheless”

Introduction to Scripture

Last week we went off-road from the lectionary, that cycle of readings that guides our worship. Wasn't Bob's sermon wonderful? It's good for us preachers not to be enslaved by the lectionary. But it's also good to stick to it—sort of like eating at your Mom's where you get balanced meals—vegies and all.

So the lectionary serves up for today a passage from the David saga in the Old Testament. Before I read it, here's a little background. This narrative picks up after the shepherd boy David has defeated the Philistine giant Goliath and proven himself to be a talented soldier. Saul has died and David has been anointed king by all the tribes of Israel. He has with great fanfare brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, the place he has chosen to be his capital. The ark of the covenant was the box that held the tablets of the law and represented God's presence which was quite free to move about.

Now in our text for today, David is contemplating building a house, or temple, for God (for the ark), a more permanent dwelling for the deity which, incidentally, would solidify David's authority and legitimacy. While David wants to build God a house, God speaking through the prophet Nathan turns around and promises to build David a house, or dynasty. As you hear the text, you will notice a wordplay with the word “house” which can mean, depending on context, “dwelling,” “palace,” “temple” or “dynasty.” Listen for God's word: *2 Samuel 7:1-17*.

Sermon

When I first looked at this text from 2 Samuel it seemed like one of those ancient, remote texts, maybe interesting from a historical or etymological point of view, but basically remote from our lives, seemingly irrelevant. Imagine my surprise when I turned to the commentary from my favorite Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann. His words jumped off the page. He declared: “I judge this oracle [of Nathan] with its unconditional promise to David to be the most crucial theological statement in the Old Testament”ⁱ

Really? Why would anyone choose this passage as “the most crucial theological statement in the Old Testament”? In choosing it Dr. Brueggemann is skipping over some pretty big contenders—

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1),

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:1),

—to name but a couple.

Apparently, as I discovered, Dr. Brueggemann is not alone in his assessment of this text's importance. This passage of scripture, it turns out, has been a favorite of preachers over the

centuries and a lynchpin of Protestant theology. Why?

Because this oracle which the prophet Nathan delivers to King David represents a shift in the theology of the Old Testament, or at least in the so-called Deuteronomic theology. Deuteronomic theology is what scholars call the theology rooted in and informed by, as it sounds, the book of Deuteronomy. It is found not only in the book of Deuteronomy but also in what are sometimes called the historical books--Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings.ⁱⁱ The central idea in this theology is that of covenant-- an agreement--which works like this: God does mighty and saving deeds for Israel. Then in return God commands certain behavior. Israel promises to do what God commands. If Israel is obedient, God promises blessings. And if Israel is disobedient, it's curses.

Here's an example of typical Deuteronomic theology. It's a speech which Moses gives as the people are about to enter the Promised Land:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perishⁱⁱⁱ

Over and over in these historical books of the Old Testament, history is interpreted through this lens. The plot, in short, goes like this: good, obedient people prosper and bad, disobedient people suffer. It all hinges on *if*. *If* Israel follows God's covenant commands, all is well. And *if not*, well, Israel, look out!

So, against this backdrop, Nathan's oracle to David introduces a new twist into the understanding of God. Instead of a conditional commitment to David, a provisional blessing dependent upon David's obedience, God issues him a blank check. God promises without reservation a dynasty which will never end. Speaking about David's son, Solomon, God declares, "Nevertheless, I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me, your throne shall be established forever."^{iv} God is promising utter and irrevocable commitment to not only David but to a whole Davidic dynasty and through it to Israel.

In this oracle, God's "if" changes to "nevertheless."^v This is a watershed revelation! David's predecessor, Israel's first king, Saul, violated God's commands^{vi}, and he got the boot. But David, who certainly flunked the obedience test more than once, will be blessed in spite of his failings. This is a powerful and clear rendition of justification by grace. The "works" or ethical behavior of David or Israel are not the deciding factor. God loves unconditionally.

This theology of grace underpins everything the Christian gospel claims about God and is what the reformers rediscovered in the sixteenth century. We can never earn God's love. We can never be good enough to deserve the blessings God gives us. By the same token, we can never screw up so bad that God will abandon us. We can never be a lost cause in God's eyes. God is eternally committed to us by God's *hesed*, the Hebrew word usually translated "steadfast love."

That love freely chooses us and fiercely cares for us. In the words of Ephesians which Leslye just read, “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved”^{vii} It’s by grace, unmerited, free grace, God’s *hesed*, that we are saved.

Now back to the quotation from Walter Brueggemann with which I began. I confess that I cut off Dr. Brueggemann before he finished. This is what he said in full:

I judge this oracle [of Nathan] with its unconditional promise to David to be the most crucial theological statement in the Old Testament, but it is not the whole of Old Testament faith.

He goes on to say that while the covenantal “if” is silenced in this theology, it has not been nullified. Therefore, we “must struggle with the tension of ‘if’ and ‘nevertheless’ that is present in the Bible, in our own lives, and in the very heart of God.”^{viii}

What Dr. Brueggemann is talking about is the tension between God’s judgment and God’s grace. When we totally do away with every *if*, every execution of God’s judgment, God’s grace becomes, in Bonhoeffer’s phrase, “cheap grace.” Think of a parent and a child. The parent says to the child, “*If* you don’t quit hitting your sister, then you’re going to spend the rest of the day indoors wiping down all the base boards.” Should the parent not follow through on the punishment when the child continues to behave aggressively and instead takes the child out for ice cream, the parent’s threats become meaningless. A pattern of leniency every time the child misbehaves is certainly not in the child’s best interest nor in reality true love. On the other hand, if the parent only displays love conditionally, only when the child behaves, that’s not true love either.

There is a tension at the center of our faith which recognizes that God does make demands upon us. God does expect obedience from us. God does want a world where people behave ethically and follow God’s laws. And if we fail, there are consequences. And yet, God is gracious and merciful. We can never measure up to all the demands. God loves us nevertheless.

There is no easy resolution of the tension of God’s *if* and God’s *nevertheless*. Both are displayed throughout the Bible.

- *If* you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.’ (Joshua 24:20)
- *If* a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. (Mark 3:24)
- *If* any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were cast into the sea. (Mark 9:42)

These verses and a zillion others make it clear that our actions do have consequences. There is no way we can dismiss God’s *ifs*.

And yet the Bible is full of God’s *neverthelesses*, God’s amazing grace delivered to us in spite of our failures, weakness, and inability to save ourselves.

- *Nevertheless* [God] regarded their distress when he heard their cry, for their sake he remembered his covenant and showed compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love (Psalm 106:44-45)
- Look at the birds of the air, they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, [*nevertheless*], God cares for them (Matthew 6:21)
- [*Nevertheless*] God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ

died for us. (Romans 5:8)

When the early church declared that Jesus was descended from the house and lineage of David, it was claiming this heritage of God's unconditional love. God's *ifs* are critically important. But in Jesus Christ, God's **NEVERTHELESS** is written in big, bold, capital letters.

So what might all this mean for us on a July Sunday here in Athens, Georgia some 3,000 after Nathan delivered his oracle to King David? Is it relevant to us? I hope it gives us some comfort. I hope it says to us that God is utterly committed to us, regardless. I hope it underscores the sense that we belong to God—in life, in death, always.

Beyond that, let me suggest one practical implication God's 'nevertheless' might have for us. If God loves us unconditionally, perhaps we need to work harder to love others the same way. I challenge you to try it for a week. Just this week, lay off the judgment and emphasize grace. Try loving nevertheless. Since my kids and husband are away, I can use these examples: Try loving your moody teenager nevertheless. Try loving your spouse, some of whose habits are most irritating, nevertheless. Try loving the colleague whose failings make your work more difficult nevertheless. Even try loving your enemies, as Jesus said to do, whose actions are abhorrent nevertheless.

The neverthelesses don't erase the tensions of dealing with relationships that are less than perfect. But they do go a long way toward helping us be more Godlike, more Christlike. Reflecting on David centuries later Luke called him "a man after [God's] own heart."^{ix} I can't help but think that having assurance of God's steadfast love toward him, made David more able to love like God, a man after God's own heart.

God loves us nevertheless. Go and do likewise—at least for a week!—that you, too, may be a man, a woman, a child after God's own heart. Amen.

i. Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1990) p. 259.

ii. The book of Jeremiah also reflects Deuteronomic theology.

iii. Deuteronomy 30:15-18

iv. 2 Samuel 7:15-16

v. The conjunction "But" which begins verse 15 can be rendered as "nevertheless." See Brueggemann, *ibid.*, p. 257.

vi. See 1 Samuel 13:13

vii. Ephesians 2:4-5

viii. Brueggemann, *Ibid.*, p. 259.

ix Acts 13:22