Sunday, May 17, 1987
I'M THE EXCEPTION (No. 2 in a Series: Lies We Tell Ourselves)
Romans 12:1-3; Matthew 5:38-48

According to one story, once when Frederick II, an 18th-century king of Prussia, went on an inspection tour of a Berlin prison, he was greeted with the cries of prisoners who fell on their knees and protested their unjust imprisonment. While listening to these pleas of innocence, Frederick's eye was caught by a solitary figure in the corner — a prisoner seemingly unconcerned with all the commotion. "Why are you here?" Frederick asked him. "Armed robbery, your Majesty." "Were you guilty?" the king asked. "Oh yes, indeed, your Majesty. I entirely deserve my punishment." At that, Frederick summoned the jailer and said, "Release this guilty man at once. I will not have him kept in this prison where he will corrupt all the fine innocent people who occupy it."

For many of us today, the idea that an imprisoned person would concede the justice of his punishment seems highly unlikely, and so we are amused by the story. But not only is the story amusing, it hopefully also disturbs us, for it is about a value all of us would admit is important — honesty, with others and with ourselves. This man in prison did not deceive himself by putting the blame for his imprisonment on someone else; he accepted the truth about himself. He had done wrong and was thus being justly punished.

We can understand why the king reacted as he did. We too know how infrequently honesty is found in common life — how rare it is for a person to say openly, "I made a mistake," or "I made the wrong choice."

In this sermon series, we are dealing primarily with the subject of "self-honesty and its opposite, lies we tell ourselves." As noted in the introduction sermon to this series, we are all good at self-deception. We exhibit an amazing agility in avoiding the truth about who we are, what we do, and why we do it.

Self-deception occurs when people who are committed to certain values act against those values while convincing themselves that what they are doing does not, in fact, violate those values. We deceive ourselves, for example, when we violate the rules of the democratic process for the purpose of defending the democratic way of life.

We can detect instances of self-deception when people interpret to us the meaning of their behavior in ways that seem far-fetched or skewed. Self-deception lurks in denials, double-mindedness, rationalizations, cover-ups, and cover stories.

Over and over again, there are stories and passages in the Bible that illustrate the danger of lying to oneself. It puts a block in the life of faith. This morning, we are going to deal with one of the main lies we tell ourselves—"I am the exception," and there is no story in the Bible that illustrates this lie better than that of King David and Nathan the prophet.

Part of the story was made into a movie years ago entitled David and Bathsheba.

Here's the way the book of II Samuel in the Old Testament begins the story: "It happened late one afternoon when David arose from his couch and was walking upon the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful" (II Samuel 11:2).

Being the king and therefore having all the power he needed, David asked his staff to find out who the woman was. They reported back that her name was Bathsheba and that she was married to a soldier named Uriah, who was away on military assignment fighting the king's war. So David sent others to bring Bathsheba to him. Listen to how the Bible describes what happened: "David sent messengers, and took her; and she came to him, and he lay with her. Then she returned to her house. And the woman conceived; and she sent and told David, 'I am with child.'"

Not delighted at the prospect of being identified as the father of Bathsheba's baby, like some political leaders in our own time, David tried to arrange a cover-up. He ordered Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, to return home in the hope that his reunion with Bathsheba would take place so that Uriah and others would assume that Uriah was the father of the child. But Uriah failed to cooperate. Ever the loyal servant of his king, he slept at David's door rather than returning to his own bed. David finally decided that more serious measures would have to be taken; he ordered Uriah to the front lines where he would be killed. As soon as Bathsheba's period of mourning was over, David took her as his wife, and she gave birth to a son.

However, the story of the king's actions was soon being whispered from one person to another. Nathan, the prophet, was one of those who heard the story. He investigated it and found it to be true. But how does one tell the king he has done wrong?

Nathan went to David and told him this story: "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and his children; it used to eat of his morsel, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him." Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, "As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he had done this thing, and because he had no pity." Nathan said to David, "You are the man!"

Until Nathan confronted the king with his wrongdoing, David had felt no guilt even though he had taken another man's wife and then had that man killed. After all, he was the king, he told himself. He was the exception. He was above the law that other people were supposed to follow. It was a grand case of self-deception.

"I am the exception." It's a lie we tell ourselves, sometimes in little ways and other times in big ways. "I don't have to wear my seatbelt. I won't have an accident." It's a way of saying, "I'm the exception."

The evidence today is overwhelming that those who smoke are much more likely to have lung cancer or heart disease than those who do not smoke, but those who continue to smoke tell themselves the lie, "I'm the exception. It won't happen to me."

All of us are theoretically in favor of good health habits, but for everyone else. "I am the exception," we tell ourselves.

In our families, our children quickly pick up the habit of making an exception of themselves, which they get from us, their parents. As parents, we make rules for our children which we do

not follow ourselves. Years ago, when I was serving as pastor of a church in a South Chicago suburb, I had a man who was a member of the congregation, but I could never find out what he did for a living. One day he confessed to me that he was a Chicago police officer. But why did he try to keep that a secret? Because of a city law that stated that all Chicago police officers had to live within the city limits, but he did not. He thought the rule was basically a good one, but he made an exception for himself. He gave as his official address the house where his parents lived, which was within the city limits.

This man, however, always lived in fear that someone would find out the truth and report him, and he would either have to move or lose his job. He had three children, and they were all instructed to never reveal what their father's job was. This man was very strict with his children. He had rules for them that he expected them to obey. Frequently, he told me that he didn't want his children to grow up to be young punks with no respect for the rules of society. His oldest son became a shoplifter as a teenager. This young man began to tell more and more lies to his parents so that it was almost impossible to tell the truth from falsehood when he spoke. His father could not understand it. Why should his son tell lies?

Not too long ago, I had a conversation with a man who traveled the country frequently as part of his job, and so he was aware of some of the problems in cities, large and small. What he deplored the most, he said, was the dishonesty of police officers and other public servants. But then, not too long after that, I heard this same man describing how he always carried a twenty-dollar bill clipped to his driver's license, so that he could easily attempt to bribe any police officer who tried to give him a traffic ticket. He also frequently bragged about getting some tickets fixed through local politicians. He had a habit of making an exception for himself.

"I am the exception. I can do things that I do not want others to do, and it won't hurt me or anyone else." It's a lie we tell ourselves.

We all need prophets like Nathan in our lives — individuals who will help us discover our self-deception. We cannot do it alone. We are too close to events and too bound up with justifying our actions.

In David's case, it took a disarming story. He felt outrage at the injustice portrayed in the story told by Nathan. And through the story, David got a glimpse of himself and his self-deception.

King David's greatness is to be found in the fact that when confronted with his self-deception, he admitted his wrongdoing. "I have sinned against God," he said. Once the self-deception is admitted, it begins to be overcome, and broken relations can be mended. It took tremendous courage for the king to admit his sin, and it took even greater courage for Nathan to confront him.

If a man as good and decent as King David was supposed to be can deceive himself, then we can and we do as well. Where are our Nathans? Maybe this sermon can play the role of Nathan for you. We all need the Nathans in our lives who will speak to us, even at personal risk, about the lies we tell ourselves, and we need to be Nathan to others.

We are to be especially careful of the lie, "I'm the exception." St. Paul wrote to the church at Rome, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your minds, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. I bid every one of you not to think more highly of himself or herself than one ought to think."

As Christians, we are not to make exceptions of ourselves, but rather to be exceptional people because we do not conform to the lies of the world. Before God, there can be no illusions, no pretense, no lies. Amen.