

Sermon Preached by The Rev. John S. Nieman
St. Margaret's Episcopal Church
July 19, 2021 Pentecost 8/Proper 11/Year B
Texts -- 2 Samuel 7:1-14a; Psalm 89:20-37; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

Some of you know that I go to the YMCA a few times a week, or at least I try to. You know because you've seen me there. On a good week I'll get there three times, but more likely it's two. People go to the gym for a variety of reasons, and you can usually deduce those reasons according to the time of day you go. When you go mid-morning on a weekday, you're likely to see people who are in their mature years, many twenty years older than I am. Some of them put me to shame with the distance they run on the treadmill or the amount of weight they lift. They're in better shape than many twenty-year-olds. Some of them are simply trying to regain balance and a better level of mobility. They are all inspiring.

When you go late in the afternoon, you're likely to see the young body-builders lifting huge amounts of weight, and flexing their muscles in the mirror between reps. They're not at all modest about revealing their ripped abs, bulging quads, and biceps the size of my thighs. I can't decide if they inspire me or demoralize me.

I go because, beginning about ten years ago, I realized I could no longer ignore my disintegrating body without suffering serious consequences. I go to keep pain at bay. I go to ward off surgery on my back. I go in order to stay upright and mobile for as many years as possible. And I've learned first-hand in the process that what everyone says is true: I just feel so much better when I stay with it.

One of the first things you need to learn when you go to the gym is to quickly discern and respect your limitations. If you don't, it can mean serious injury. Everyone there – from the eighty-five year old rebuilding what's left of her heart muscle after quadruple by-pass surgery, to the twenty-five year old admiring his strapping pecs in the mirror – everyone has a limit to what they can do. Facing that limit can sometimes be frustrating. But it is crucial.

Scripture has some important things to say about human limitations. For weeks now, we've been hearing the story of the incredible rise of David to power and prestige. His is a story that any contemporary campaign strategist would yearn to tell about her candidate. He is born of humble stock in a small town; labors in the fields as a boy tending sheep day and night while learning the meaning of hard work and sacrifice. Full of grit, courage and street smarts, he steps up to slay the mighty giant, Goliath, instantly gaining hero status. He spends years paying his dues, while evading the rage of the paranoid King Saul. Finally, he becomes king himself, and manages to do the seemingly impossible: he unites the north and south. Or, to bring it up to date, he unites the red states and the blue states. He builds himself a proper palace to rival that of neighboring kings, and all the world is at his feet. He's young and handsome and virile. Women are pining for him. Men want to be him. He surely has a body like the afternoon crowd at the gym. He apparently can do anything. Nothing can stop him. He has no limit.

And in order to demonstrate that unstoppable power for sure, in order to prove himself worthy to play with the big boys, in order to show the world that his Kingdom deserves respect, David sets out to build a temple for his god. After all, every god has to have a house to live in, and every king has a responsibility to see that it's built. It's a sign of his success. Plus, it's another boost to his ego, a little like admiring your ripped bod in the mirror. So David sets out to do the one last thing that will gain him access to the ranks of the bulked out, afternoon crowd: the heavy lifters, the ones that seem to have no limits.

But God stops him in his tracks. The prophet, Nathan, confronts David with the reality of his limitations. God is not interested in living in a house, says Nathan. You might think it's important. But it's not in the cards. Perhaps your successor will get to build God's house, but

not you. For now, you've got to work within the limits given to you. And remember, it's God who called you to be king in the first place. Ultimately, this is not your kingdom. You're just its steward for a time. You can do only what's given for you to do, not whatever you want to do. Don't forget that. Whether or not you have respect in the eyes of the surrounding nations is irrelevant. What's relevant is your faithfulness to God and your vocation in your time and place. So David discovers his limit, a limit given in the form of the will of God.

Most of us don't like limits. They frustrate and sometimes anger us. The more determined we are, the more we try to bust out of them. The American myth says that you can have it all if you just try hard enough. But limits are real. They are not faults. They are not something we need to apologize for or seek forgiveness for. In fact, limits are gifts. They are expressions of grace. They are the givens of our lives. They constitute the reality of a situation. They form the context within which we go about our lives and work. They form the context of the ministry we are given to do as a parish community.

Does that mean we should not stretch ourselves to do better, to do more? Of course not! That's how we grow. That's how we discover more fully who we are called to be. And most of us have areas of our lives where we haven't even come close to reaching our limits.

But there are limits. Some of them are relative limits, and some of them are absolute. The relative ones are those that can be pushed and stretched and finally surpassed through hard work, determination, and discipline. Two years ago I could handle a certain amount of weight on each of the machines at the gym. Now I can handle just a little more. I surpassed what was a relative limit. But you can be sure I'll never be able to press 400 pounds. For one thing, it doesn't interest me. But more importantly, the structure of my body won't allow it. I've got small bones, a light frame. That, among other things, is a given that defines an absolute limit to what I'll ever be able to lift without seriously injuring myself. I can mourn that. I can be frustrated with that. But I can't change that. Regardless, it's a gift to know it.

How might God right now be trying to get your attention to discern your limits? Do you have a prophet like Nathan in your life, calling you to take a second look at your plans and desires? Which limits in your life do you think are relative, that is, ones that can be reasonably pushed and stretched to enable you to lift and do more? And which ones do you think are absolute, that is, ones that really form the boundary beyond which you cannot go? Are you able to see your limits not as curses, but as blessings, gifts, forms of Divine grace?

David does not get to build God's house. God imposes that limit on him. But Nathan assures David that whether or not he gets to build a house for God is not important. What's important is that David and his generation do their part to build a greater house, a household of God's people. And to recognize that they are to do that in their time and place, within the limits given to them. The knowledge of what he can and cannot do, the knowledge of his limits, is a true gift for David. And it is a true gift for all of us.