

“The King was Deeply Moved”

Salado UMC—12 August 2018: 12th after Pentecost
Preaching Text: 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33—Year B
Salado, Texas 76571

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“The world slides, the world goes, and death makes equal the rich and the poor”

**(—Bangambiki Habyarimana, *Pearls Of Eternity*,
a Rwandan community worker).**

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My shrewd administrative assistant at First Graham UMC, a long time ago, noticed my upcoming sermon that had to do with parenting. She asked, “Are we having a pulpit guest Sunday?” Ha! Ha! Honestly, who among us can set ourselves up as experts on parenting? When it comes to parenting, even the most capable folks become dizzy and unsure of their footing. Trying to raise children reminds me of the old Peace Corps slogan, slightly altered—“Parenting is the hardest job you will ever love.” No matter how our children turn out, whether like David’s son Absalom, or like Zechariah and Elizabeth’s son John, parents love their children unconditionally

Sometimes I wonder when Jesus told parables if he thought about Israel’s stories from the Hebrew Bible. Of course, Jesus had heard these thrilling stories of yesteryear in the synagogue, Sabbath in and Sabbath out. In fact, Luke clearly tells us about Jesus who “when he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom . . .” (Luke 4:16).

A most cherished of Jesus’ beloved parables is the Prodigal Son. It captures our imagination. Perhaps it does this because we all know people who fit the various characters within the parable—like the elder and younger son. I expect we all know a long-suffering parent who, despite having a scoundrel for a son, loves him nevertheless. This is a love that lasts all the days of the parent’s life. I know this parable captured Rembrandt’s imagination. I once saw his inventive painting of Luke’s parable of a father and sons in St. Petersburg’s Hermitage museum of art.

I wonder when Jesus told this parable if he considered a real-life father like David who had sons with indelibly distinctive personalities. Some of David’s many sons were Amnon, Absalom, Adonijah, and Solomon (see 2 Samuel 3:2-3; 1 Chronicles 3:1-9 for a more complete list). Each son was as different as the elder and younger brother in Jesus’ parable. Let’s hear part of the story of Absalom’s death, one of David’s sons.

[5] The king ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, saying, “Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.” And all the people heard when the king gave orders to all the commanders concerning Absalom. [6] So the army went out into the field against Israel; and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. [7] The men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the slaughter there was great on that day, twenty thousand men. [8] The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword. [9] Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. His head caught fast in the oak, and he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on. [15] And ten young men, Joab’s armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him, and killed him.

[31] Then the Cushite came; and the Cushite said, "Good tidings for my lord the king! For the Lord has vindicated you this day, delivering you from the power of all who rose up against you." [32] The king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" The Cushite answered, "May the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man." [33] The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son" (2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33)!

The father's love here reflects God's love for God's children. Yet we also detect political intrigue between a David and Absalom. Do you remember the story of David and Absalom? David had a third son by his wife Maacah, daughter of King Talmi of Geshur and his name was Absalom (2 Samuel 3:3). As Frederick Buechner tells the story, imagine what kind of love is at work behind the scenes:

Almost from the start, Absalom had a number of strikes against him. For one thing, he was much too handsome for his own good, and his special pride was such a magnificent head of hair that once a year when he had it trimmed, the trimmings alone tipped the scales at three and a half pounds. For another thing, his father, King David, was always either spoiling him rotten or reading him the riot act. This did not promote stability of character. He murdered his lecherous brother Amnon for fooling around with their sister Tamar, and when the old war-horse Joab wouldn't help him patch things up with David afterwards, he set fire to his hay field. All Israel found this derring-do irresistible, of course, and when he eventually led a revolt against his father, a lot of them joined him.

On the eve of the crucial battle, David was a wreck. If he was afraid he might lose his throne, he was even more afraid he might lose Absalom. The boy was thorn in his flesh, but he was also the apple of his eye, and before the fighting started, he told the chiefs of staff till they were sick of hearing it that if Absalom fell into their clutches, they must promise to go easy on him for his father's sake. Remembering what had happened to his hay field, old Joab kept his fingers crossed and when he found Absalom caught in the branches of an oak tree by his beautiful hair, he ran him through without blinking an eye. When they broke the news to David, it broke his heart, just as simple as that, and he cried out in words that have echoed down the centuries ever since. "O my son Absalom, my son, my son," he said. "Would I have died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son" (2 Samuel 18:33).

He meant it, of course. If he could have done the boy's dying for him, he would have done it. If he could have paid the price for the boy's betrayal of him, he would have paid it. If he could have given his own life to make the boy alive again, he would have given it. But even a king can't do things like that. As later history was to prove, it takes a God (*Peculiar Treasures*, Harper & Row, 1979, pp. 5-6).

It is God's will that God relates to us. As Paul reminds us in the epistle to Rome, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor

height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39). Yet just as surely as David and Absalom are father and son, they do not share an archetypal "father and son-like" relationship. David and Absalom as "father and son blood-kin" does not guarantee an ideal or model father son relationship—they must nurture the relationship.

I suppose Christians like us will try to ferret out some moral from this story, but I will simply say "good luck" with that. Whatever agreeable, flawless meanings we manufacture, those in the know recognize David's absolute torment of soul when he hears the overwhelming bad news about his son. Every parent who has lost a child identifies the truth of these words: "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son." These words clutch us because we can bear to only lose so much.

At the beginning of Samuel's so called "David Cycle," the prophet Samuel categorizes David: "The Lord has sought out one after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14). David now, the "one after God's own heart," reveals to us God's heart in his own story. Perhaps for this reason our tradition continues to share David's stories—both in David's triumph and folly. In David's pain we perceive God's face who shares with us our woe and misfortune. This is a God exposed to our tears and has divine tears too.

Ultimately, centered in all of creation is our God who cries: "My son, my son! Would I had died instead of you!" David's weeping in this story are part of the history of David. Yet, we might say, this weeping is a part of all of our history.

I find almost irresistible what a comic once said about becoming a Christian: "Going to church no more makes you a Christian than sleeping in your garage makes you a car." For us today I would pray that . . . being a Christian means more than simply having a concrete relationship with God. It also entails a transforming relationship with the world. A church at its best and fulfilling its highest calling wants to help us be more than just on speaking terms with God. It wants us and our faith to be carriers of the gospel—to offer the good news that changes the world.

What if? What if we made this decision? What if we committed ourselves to helping transform the world? What if we decided to let God change us so that we did not simply receive the gospel, but we carried the gospel to others? What if . . . ?

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