

SamueSermon 08-25/26-2018
Cause and Effect – Rev. Markus Wegenast
2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33

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^[a] 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!”*

1)

From a scientific viewpoint this world is governed by the laws of physics. One of those laws is the law of cause and effect. There can be no effect without a cause, and there can be no cause without an effect – at least, for the most part (...!).

For a mysterious reason we see this also play out in the intricate relationships between people, people like you and I. Our causes have effects, or to say it a bit more anthropologically: Our actions have consequences. It’s the way life in this world works.

Last weekend we talked about this in very uncomfortable terms: we talked about the consequences that our sins have. Ouch, that is a hot button issue! You have been very frank with me after last weekend’s sermon. It is not easy to listen to a 20 minute talk on this subject – and yet you did and I trust that God sat with you and then walked with you.

I trust the same will happen today. Today we heard the final story from the books of Samuel that have accompanied us this summer. We end our 2 month journey on a low note – and in a way it is a conclusion to last weekend’s uncomfortable subject of the consequences of sin.

2)

If you felt a bit at a loss as you listened to the story of King David and his son Absalom's death, don't beat yourself up. Our scripture lesson was pieced together and had some major gaps. And if you missed last weekend's story then it's even harder to understand. So here is the gist of the storyline:

King David, otherwise known as a hero of faith, morals and behavior, committed some terrible sins. He abuses his power and gets a married woman pregnant, murders her husband, then orders her to marry him without ever truly noticing that he did anything wrong.

God sends a prophet and convicts him, gets his conscience working again and David does repent. God immediately grants forgiveness, but this forgiveness does not take the consequences of his sins away.

That was the tough lesson we were exposed to last weekend: that sins typically have consequences even when we reconcile and work toward forgiveness.

Today's story is the sad highlight of the consequences of David's sins. God had announced those consequences a long time ago. He said David would experience how his own family would turn against him, and now, 4 years later he finds himself at war with his own son Absalom who rebelled against his dad.

Absalom's rebel army, even though they took over Jerusalem for a brief time, are no match against King David's experienced army (in case you were wondering: that's what that odd note about the forest killing more men than the actual battle is about: They were so inexperienced that just fleeing toward the woods got them killed...).

David was used to being involved in wars – he was a man of war. He stood up against Goliath as a youth. But not even that battle was comparable to the terrifying battle against his own son. Even though he gives his soldiers explicit instructions not to kill his son Absalom, the seeming curse, or rather: the consequences of his sins, won't let his son escape from certain death. And so our story comes to a terrible conclusion with our King David crying out loud:

“O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!”

Do you hear the pain of a father's heart? Do you hear in it the regret and the realization that this all was a consequence, an effect, of the cause – the sins – of the king from a couple of years ago?

What a disturbing end of our journey through the books of Samuel!

3)

And so we ask: Why? Why does it have to be that way? Is God not capable of letting his grace rule and save David and his people from more terrible harm? Is God not almighty enough (!) to do that?

If God is above all physical laws including the law of cause and effect, why can't he avoid a curse on David's life from playing out?

I'm a big believer in God's almightiness. I would say: of course God can take effects away from causes. But I also realize that the Bible communicates to us how life in this world works. And in this world, causes have effects and that's why God warns us and gives us laws not to engage in certain causes.

- When we drink too much wine we can be sincerely sorry for our drunkenness but we will still have a hangover the next day...
- When we stab someone we can ask forgiveness, receive it and reconcile – but there will be scar on this person for the rest of her life ...
- When we embezzle a friend of his valuable assets we may repay him fourfold later, but it won't change the years he had to live in poverty due to our crime...

Please don't expect me to be able to satisfactorily explain the complicated relationship of sin, forgiveness and consequences of sin. We can spend a lot of time thinking through the laws of cause and effect within human and human-divine relationships.

- We can speculate about the difference between a natural law and a divine cause: Does God cause the consequences of sins - like Absalom's death - or are they just a natural result?
- We can speculate about the nature of God's foreknowing: Does God just foresee certain effects that he can make known to us like the prophet Nathan made Absalom's revolt known to David years prior?
- We can speculate about the question why God on the other hand seems to let some injustices slip. Why do some criminals seem to get away with their crimes?
- [We can speculate about the nature of God withholding his life-giving blessing in the presence of sin. Why does God's blessing not outweigh the effect of certain causes?]

No, I can't answer all or any of these complicated questions. But what I feel I must do today is to work out how divine forgiveness stands powerfully in the midst of the curses of wrong decisions that human beings like you and I make.

4)

And for this we have to connect the sad story from today with another sad story of the Bible centuries later.

David, a father, cries over the death of his beloved son – as a Christian are you reminded of something? What is the most prominent father figure in the NT? Isn't it God? Did God the Father ever cry?

What about Good Friday?

Before the joy of Easter there was the darkness after the son's crucifixion. The sun stopped shining – or was it the light of the Father that he so graciously gave into this world before the sun was even created (Gen1)?!

When Christ went into the powerlessness of Good Friday didn't he embody our question that we asked earlier when we wondered if God was not capable of saving David's son Absalom? Was God not able to save Jesus from dying – sure he was – but there was a cause to be done that would bring about an effect.

It's a completely different scenario than that of David and Absalom: Absalom revolted against his father; Jesus obeyed his father. Absalom's death caused nothing but grief, Jesus' death caused nothing but blessing.

Both sons were loved by their fathers but one of them was one with his father and gave himself up voluntarily to cause an effect that would reach back into the time of David and Absalom but also forward into the time of your life.

Through Christ God is present in the midst of the curses of your life. Through Christ God is present when you live through the consequences of poor decision making. Through Christ God is standing right next to you, right with you when terrible cause-and-effect happenings are occurring in your life.

During some particularly discouraging times of the Protestant Reformations Martin Luther wrote:

"If God gave up his own son for us all, how could God ever intend to forsake us in less important things? If we perish, then Christ the Almighty Ruler of the world himself must suffer with us. Even if this cause were to collapse, I would much rather be Ruined with Christ than rule with Caesar."

There are many questions left unanswered but through believing we may comprehend that these questions lose their biting power in light of the answer that God has given us in Christ. Yes, consequences of our actions may haunt us, but the power of forgiveness is real. It meets us in the midst of our suffering as one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century poignantly wrote:

"We suffer [aka: deal with the effects of our causes!] as we suffered before, but our suffering is no longer a passive perplexity, but is transformed into a pain which is creative, fruitful, full of power and promise. The road which is impassable has been made known to us in the crucified and risen Lord." – Karl Barth

5)

When we started our journey through the books of Samuel I posed the opening question: “Is this all relevant to our lives and times?” I asked you to tell Pastor Liz and I. Thank you for all the feedback you have given us – both the critical and the affirming.

What is the relevance of the story of Samuel, Saul, David, Bathsheba, Uriah, Nathan and Absalom? If their stories show us one thing then it is that life is complicated. Was David a good guy or a bad guy? It’s vantage point! In the same way as many of your questions of life are answered differently depending on your vantage point. Life is not as clear cut as we’d sometimes like it. Life is complicated and I can’t think of a better way than making it through those lives with a God who declared centuries before David was born that he is walking with us:

"The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you or forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged" (Deut.31:8).

Walk with God, walk with him through Christ. Live out this salvation and choose life with God over and over again through Christ. Come to know God better and better – and even if the curses and consequences of wrong choices may never cease, do not stop seeking the God who has worked out a blessing for you from a position of utter powerlessness on a cross. Embrace the effect that God has caused through his beloved son and be in love with your God. Amen.

Afterword: David said he’d jump with God over walls – we can do the same: jump over the walls of the even most terrible effects that our causes can have!