

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
Deal Gently: The Capacity for Suffering Love
2 Samuel 18
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For many Christians, David is a well-known figure from the Old Testament. Shepherd, king, poet, and great-something-grandfather of Jesus of Nazareth. Think of all the people associated with David: Samuel and Saul and Jonathan, Goliath, Bathsheba, Uriah, and Nathan. Joab. Christians have found meaning and inspiration in David and through his interactions with all the people who we meet through him. David's life was shaped and defined by his relationships, some good, some bad, none as heartbreaking as the story of David and Absalom. I wonder how many know the story of David and Absalom. And for those who do, where do they find the Gospel in this tragic story?

Absalom was the third of David's sons. For years, he had smoldering resentment toward his father for failing to discipline his half-brother Amnon for Amnon's treachery against his sister Tamar. The distance between Absalom and David grew and grew until Absalom killed Amnon and fled to the other side of the country fearing for his life at the hands of his father-king. When David finally summoned him to come back home, the reunion was an illusion. It was like forgiveness without reconciliation; Absalom was welcomed home but not welcomed in David's presence. David wouldn't even speak with him.

Finally, Absalom broke. Either out of anger or resentment or pride or despair, he broke. He began to undermine his father, speaking against him when he had a chance, beginning to win the people to him and against David. And he was good at it. He was handsome, winsome, a natural leader with a wound in his heart that could not be healed. And that made him dangerous.

His resentment exploded into violent rejection. Absalom raised up a militia and attacked. He intended to make himself king. David, seeing he was outnumbered in this surprise attack from his own son, retreated and left the city. It was only a few days later that the conflict could no longer be avoided. The battle was on. David's forces against Absalom and his forces. Sending out his generals to the battle, David's last words to them were quite unexpected, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom."

It's hard to know exactly what he thought that meant in the chaos of battle. *Deal gently with Absalom*. What did he hope would happen? Presumably, I suppose he meant that he hoped Absalom's life would be spared. He still hoped for redemption too long denied, for reconciliation too long delayed. The parent, even when rejected, hated, attacked, still loves the child. Is this where the Gospel is in this story?

In David's desire for compassion toward his rebellious child, there is a sure picture of God who loves God's children, even when the children rebel and reject and deny. "The Lord is merciful

and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” The heart of compassion says to the long arm justice, deal gently. The world could use more gentleness these days. It’s like there are people carrying sticks of dynamite in each fist just daring someone nearby to light a match. Some days you find yourself driving next to one on the road. Give them room. Let them go on. Maybe they have wounds deep inside, too. Hurting people hurt people.

The other day I was reading through the local paper. There were two letters to the editor each launching spittle and cannonballs toward their supposed enemies in this community whom they blamed for unspecified damages to them and their way of life. I was curious about them more than anything. What prompts a person to write a grievance to the whole community through a letter to the newspaper? Does it feel good to see your name in print next to something like that? Some people wreck relationship with everyone they know so they have to hunt for more adversaries. There’s got to be one somewhere, until there’s one everywhere. Some people need to be in conflict just to know they’re still alive. I’ve learned over the years to give those people a lot of room. Sometimes it helps. Sometimes it doesn’t. Sometimes you’re just a bit player in someone else’s ongoing drama.

Whole industries are devoted to that drama, stoking anger and resentment, whatever it takes, misinformation, slander, humorous but untrue memes. It must be profitable. We’re a people among whom constantly boiling anger is wrenching the heart and soul of many who otherwise can be pretty amazing and do pretty amazing things.

Perhaps this is the Gospel in this story. The Gospel makes a people who try to be gentle like David tried to be gentle even when pressed to the limit. That wouldn’t be a terrible motto for the church in the modern world. Something like: Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God. We could use more gentleness, more peacemaking people. It’s hard. Peacemaking isn’t as self-satisfying as sword-drawing. But I’m also not entirely convinced it should as hard as it seems like it is.

The thing is that most people don’t really suffer the kind of tyranny they’re convinced they suffer. A community who remembers its actual martyrs knows that every slight offense doesn’t have to turn into WWII. And every neighbor isn’t a potential enemy. But I think it must feel good on some level to feel like it is.

I went by a house in our area. Nice house, nice street, quiet neighborhood, pool in the side yard. Big ol’ boat behind a big ol’ truck about to head out to the lake for the weekend. And a flag flying over the front door. Big ol’ yellow flag with a coiled snake and the warning, “Don’t tread on me.” Maybe it’s just a cheeky, historical flag he flew, and maybe I’m overthinking the whole thing, but I’m just thinking to myself as I go by, I have so many questions. Looking around the house at what looks like a pretty nice life, “Who’s treading on you?” Has life really been that hard for you? Like, as a pastor, I want to hear that story; I want to help bring deliverance where there is injustice and oppression. Like, that’s my job. May this is a cry for help. So, I went to the door and rang the doorbell to ask. No, I did not. But I imagined doing it. Maybe I should someday.

By all respects, David of all people should have been flying a “You shouldn’t have treaded on me” battle flag. Chased from his house, shamed into the wilderness, rejected by his own progeny, if there’s a picture of a person who should be hissing fire, it’s him. But he’s not. And that says something to us about the capacity for suffering love. He’s a picture of grief not anger, of desire for reconciliation, not destruction, ‘Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.’ For my sake. I need this.

They don’t. The story is told in gory detail. Absalom fleeing from David’s pursuing soldiers gets his head, or tradition says, his flowing locks of hair caught in the branches of a tree. He’s hanging there, suspended between heaven and earth like a pinata. Deal gently, they do not. At the direction of Joab, David’s soldiers pounce and kill him there. They kill out of anger, out of retribution, out of a desire for vengeance, out of human nature. They want to punish him and destroy him for what he had done. It’s a very human reaction. The enemy is vulnerable. Finish him.

It’s a very human reaction, but it’s not the way of God. And it wasn’t the heart of David. David’s kingdom is saved. David’s heart is broken. He feels like a man who has been given the whole world but has lost his soul. When David hears the news of Absalom’s death, the reaction isn’t that of David victorious king. It is that of David, grieving father.

O my son, Absalom. Three times, he says his name, Absalom. Five times O my son. Would that I have died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!

The depths of a father’s love, that the father could say that about *that* son. After all his life, here we have finally found David, a man after God’s own heart, the God who relentlessly loves even those who reject him. In the eyes of everyone, Absalom is worthy of only hatred and destruction as an enemy who threatened the kingdom. In the heart of David, Absalom is still the little boy making sandcastles in the backyard. Oh, my son, oh my son, oh my son. They are among the saddest, heart-wrenching words ever spoken.

We can imagine them said by God over us. Oh, my son. Oh, my daughter.

Perhaps this is the Gospel in this story: here is love for the enemy, for the one who has genuinely hurt you, not the vague idea that someone out there is trying to hurt you, but someone who has really done it. The Gospel isn’t a vague idea about the idea of love for the idea of other people. It’s about the real cost of real love for the real person right in front of you. Jesus talks a lot about parents and children and neighbors and enemies.

“As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him.” There is Gospel here, the Gospel of Jesus who prays from the cross, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Perhaps this is what we take away, a lesson about the depths and costliness of love for enemies. They will break your heart. They will break your spirit. But the Gospel makes people who love no matter the cost. Surely this is the Gospel.

We're on the way but not there yet because the Gospel isn't just about what we do, but about what we cannot do.

Frederick Buechner helps us see the gospel is not just what's in this story, but is not in this story and what cannot be. Buechner says in his own reflection in this story, "If David 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."

Finally, there we see the Gospel, not in what David did or tried to do with his best intentions, but what he couldn't do.

Except for the lament of Psalm 3, Absalom's name never appears again in the scripture after this story. And this story is never referred to in the rest of scripture. But the tragedy lurks in the background of every other betrayal, broken relationship, and hope for redemption. It's in the background of stories about loving Fathers and prodigal children and young men killed on trees.

Through this sad, human story, we may not see all things made clear, but we do see Jesus. We see Jesus there on the tree of death, and we see those who killed him. And we see a father's love and the Father's Love. When we do, we may not think of Absalom and David, but we think of God and Jesus and our own place in God's mercy.

We remember our own rebellion and sin, and we give thanks to God, who still shows mercy, whose love still never ends, and who gave his own life that all of us children may be welcomed home and made alive again. By his wounds, we are healed. And by his grace, we are made alive. Surely this is the Gospel of God in Jesus Christ. He laid down his life that we may have life. Let us pray that we find our lives redeemed by him in grace, find our way guided by him in peace, and find our witness made alive in him in love.

Amen.

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