

Beloved Children

Epistle Eph 4:25-5:2

Gospel John 6:35, 41-51

Lesson: 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33 (Text Courtesy of Vanderbilt Divinity Library)

18:5 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.

18:6 So the army went out into the field against Israel; and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim.

18:7 The men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the slaughter there was great on that day, twenty thousand men.

18:8 The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword.

18:9 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.

18:15 And ten young men, Joab's armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him, and killed him.

18:31 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."

18:32 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."

18:33 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!"

Those are some of the saddest words recorded in the Bible. "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

Even though Absalom had just tried to take his father's Kingdom through military force and have him killed, even though Absalom was spoiled, impatient, overly ambitious, and guilty of having his half brother murdered, David mourned him terribly when he had heard that Absalom had died. As the war was about to begin David had left orders to try to protect Absalom, but they didn't help. The pain that David had been experiencing for years as a result of Absalom's behaviors was not made any easier with his death.

It seemed as though, even though the son had unbelievable potential, he didn't have the discipline and the desire to build up a life of faith and of character. He only wanted as much power and prestige as he could as soon as possible and there wasn't much to stop him from his path. David did try, and so many of his counselors were involved in the situation, and it seems there were plenty of relatives to offer advice and guidance, yet it ended in great misery for all. David is left with no hope left for his son, and the ache of having a child die before him.

So very many families I know understand David's heartache, either through death of a child or the confusing direction a beloved one has taken in their lives, to wit one has little or no control. If only there was something to be said or done to change the directions of the beloved lost children in so many families, but there is no magic cure for such dilemmas. Sometimes life does change for the better, but rarely do they ever reach the potential that parents and family members saw in them from birth on. And when something does change, the joy is twice as glorious for those who truly loved the child and for the child itself - like the prodigal son story.

But we are left in our scriptures today with David's devastating loss and his trauma. How can one work out the loss of a beloved child? We want so desperately that those we love will have lives which envelope all their gifts and talents, ones where they continue to grow every day of their lives, reminding us of the saying that, "humans are like trees, when they stop growing they start dying." Spiritual and intellectual growth is part of the sap which makes us content and fulfilled in life, and that is the ideal we wish for all those we love.

We heard in our Gospel that Jesus said he was the eternal bread - his life and example, his holy spirit, all these are the nutrients upon which each soul can blossom. In the grounding of our lives, and digging deep into that source for our potential, we have a life greater than we can imagine regardless of which direction it takes. We want to give these nutrients especially to those we love. And yet, we can't. They have their own roots - they have to stretch out and reach for that well of life for themselves.

I once heard a saying, in the three years between my academic institutions, which spurred me onto my present path. It said, "God has no Grandchildren, only beloved children." We can't get to God through our parents' beliefs or their prayers; we can only reach God through our own endeavors. We can learn much about how we connect, we may learn good disciplines on where we can begin our journey to God through our families, but our relationship with God is our own, and no one else's. We are born again when we take responsibility for our own faith and our own lives and trust in God that the path unknown to us was cleared by his hand first.

In looking at the other scriptures for today, for words to comfort and guide us, we find this, "Be angry, but do not sin . . ." For so many it is understood that to be angry is a sin, in and of itself. And yet here and in other parts of the bible we see references to it. Jesus himself was enraged at the money lenders in the temple.

Anger is a very powerful emotion, there must be some reason God allowed us to have these feelings. And yet, it seems we are to work to keep our violent anger in check and use the feelings to motivate us for acts of justice - not to use it to commit violent, unjust, selfish acts. We are encouraged to acknowledge our anger! The challenge comes with how we use this energy force this life encouraging reality to deal with our human pain.

For his own political gain Absalom used his violent anger to manipulate thousands of followers to go against a powerful, lawful King, his own father. Absalom was subsequently very manipulative of the truth and the laws and their relationship to each other. For those who recognize the greater truths it is hard to control anger when one sees how easily someone can manipulate the masses using lies and fear. And for *building up* a community, these narcissistic motivations cannot exist.

But it wasn't Absalom's desire to build a community. He wanted to build a power base for his own desires. Paul is saying that in order to be like Christ we have to give ourselves up, we are asked to say only that which is useful for building up each other, our motivations are to be kind to each other, not to fulfill our own mini kingdoms. That is the key to having an eternal life - a life of fulfillment, a life that honors our parents and each other - a life in Christ which is a life in respect and care for a community.

Eternal life has nothing to do with going down in history and everything to do with perpetuating the love of Christ. It is through Christ that our deeds, our humanity, live on, even if our name does not. We become united with Jesus, and with each other when we take our anger and use it to motivate us to perform caring acts that build up the community.

David lost his first child with Bathsheba. As it was dying, David mourned and fasted and his people worried when the child died that he would be even more grieved. They were surprised that when David heard the child had died, he picked himself up, cleaned up, ate and quit the lamentations; because he realized that if he continued to suffer, he still could not bring the child back. And yet, when *Absalom* died David went into terrible mourning and had to be reminded by Joab of his kingly duties. Those supporters of the King who fought hard and suffered losses were not feeling as though they were allowed to be joyous at their accomplishments because the King was still so mourning the loss of his son - who was the enemy.

It is perhaps the most difficult aspect of humanity when a human is required to mourn the loss of a child, either through death or them getting lost in life, and Absalom represented both to David. But, *in order to continue on being whom God called him to be*, David had to let go of the pain his son left him.

We have to let go of our Absaloms, give them over to God, do what we can to love and forgive them, but take care not to let them tear us down. We give our Absaloms over to God with the hope that one day they will stretch their souls into God's depths and grow back into the forest of our community; as another pillar, offering shade and fresh air and beauty along with the rest of God's wondrous creations.