

“Real Families, Real Healing”

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Father’s Day

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II Corinthians 6:1-13, II Samuel 14:21-33

Our first passage comes from the Apostle Paul’s second letter to the church at Corinth. Paul is in the midst of defending his apostleship to some Christians in Corinth, who, in an effort to reject his authority, have said that he is somehow not a “real apostle.” As he progresses in defending his ministry, Paul talks about the hardships he has endured and the fruit of faithfulness he has exhibited. Note how he early in this passage he tells them with some urgency “Now is the day of salvation.” When he says that, he’s not speaking like the Southern Baptist preacher who asked his congregation, “How many of you want to go to heaven when you die?” Virtually the whole congregation stood up. He said it again, “How many of you want to go to heaven?” Only one man in the congregation was still sitting. The preacher came over to the man, “What about you? You don’t want to go to heaven when you die?” The man replied, “Yes, I want to go to heaven, but I thought you were getting together a party to leave today!”

When Paul is talking about salvation, he is not talking about going to heaven when you die. He is talking about the wholeness and fullness of life that one can have in relationship with God. He is talking about reconciliation. He’s talking about new life. And he’s inviting the Corinthians to take part in that. In other words, he’s saying, “Today is a day to experience wholeness and reconciliation in our relationship with God and with each other.” Let me also encourage you to pay attention to how, as the passage ends, Paul tells his hearers to open wide their hearts.

Read II Corinthians here.

Our second passage, from the book of II Samuel, drops us right into the middle of a larger, somewhat complex, narrative. Last week we saw little David being selected as king: the eighth of seven sons. When we encounter him in today’s text, David is older, he has been king for some time. He is a father now, with young adult children of his own. In the lead-up to the reading I’m about to do, a number of unsavory things happen. First, David commits adultery with Bathsheba, the wife of one of his soldiers named Uriah. Next, David has Uriah killed, by having his general place Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting and telling everybody else to back away. Then prophet Nathan confronts David and tells him that because he has perpetrated this evil, there will be consequences to his family and his kingdom. These consequences begin to unfold when King David’s oldest son, Amnon, sexually assaults his half-sister, David’s daughter Tamar. Tamar’s full brother, Absalom, who is David’s third son, waits impatiently for his father to condemn Amnon for this reprehensible act. Although David is angry about it, he doesn’t reprimand Amnon, in part because Amnon, as his first-born, is the apple of his eye, and in part, perhaps because he, himself is morally compromised when it comes to such things.

After two years of waiting for David to condemn Amnon's behavior, and stewing about it, Absalom takes the punishment into his own hands. He throws a feast, invites his half-brother, and when Amnon is drunk, Absalom has his servants kill him. Then Absalom flees to the country of Geshur for three years. After this, the text says, "The heart of the king went out, yearning for Absalom..." That is when Joab, David's general, sends a wise woman to David to help convince the king to bring Absalom back. It has now been five years since the assault on Tamar, and three years since the killing of Amnon. Listen for God's word as we pick up the story.

Read II Samuel here.

One of the great challenges on days like Fathers' Day or Mothers' Day is how to take seriously, as a preacher, the truth that family relationships can be complicated, painful, and full of regret. Thank God, many of us in this room, myself included, can point to healthy or reasonably healthy relationships with our parents and our children. But that is not everyone's story. And no matter how wonderful they are, no matter how much we may idealize them, no father or mother, no family, or family member, is perfect. I have a friend who is fond of saying, "Do you know what the definition of a normal family is? A normal family is one that you haven't gotten to know yet."

Families, after all, are made up of real and not ideal human beings. Even in the very strongest of families, parents and children, brothers and sisters bring to the table our own ego needs and psychic wounds, our own memories of disappointment, loss and unmet expectation. Some of those memories can be as recent as something that happened in the past twenty-four hours. Others might be from decades long past.

Because talking about families can be tricky, the temptation on a day like today is to take the easy way out. One way to do that is to altogether avoid the topic of family relationships, except perhaps for celebrating fathers or mothers in a prayer. Another is to approach the topic by holding up an image of an ideal father or mother or an ideal child and reflecting on what he or she would look like, how he or she would behave. That approach has its merits, I suppose, but today I want to deal with the fact that we do not live in an ideal world. I get reminded of that week after week. We do not live in an ideal world. We live in a world that is all too often in need of healing and reconciliation.

My father, who has more than twenty-five years in the program of Alcoholics Anonymous, was given a refrigerator magnet early in his sobriety that said, "It may be that my whole purpose in life is to serve as a warning to others." It is an interesting thought. If you ask the people with whom he has been in groups over the past couple of decades, they would say that his life has been not so much a warning, but a source of encouragement. I would say the same thing. My father's life points to the hope for healing in family relationships that can happen when people in the throes of substance abuse acknowledge their need for help and come to believe that a power greater than themselves can restore them to sanity. And then they go on to work the other steps honestly and consistently.

I'm not sure exactly what that magnet was intended to mean when it was given to my father. Perhaps it was a sponsor telling him, if you don't take your sobriety seriously, the story of your life will

become a cautionary tale. But I thought of it again this week as I was reflecting on the story of King David's relationship with his son Absalom.

It strikes me that the whole purpose of some biblical texts is to serve as a warning to others by pointing out what not to do. The story of David and Absalom serves as a perfect example of this. Like a lot of families in the Old Testament, David's family was not by any means normal. They put the fun in dysfunctional. I mean David's family had it all: adultery, incest, fratricide, overly permissive parenting, acting out, children pitted against children over parental favor and inheritance. Too be fair, royal families, especially ones where there are multiple spouses involved, tend to be a little more mixed-up than most, because accession to the throne is involved, but this really is a textbook example of what not to do. Someone has put it this way: David was a great king, a marvelous king, but a terrible father. You have to believe that David's family could have used an intervention from the ancient equivalent of The Super Nanny, or Dr. Phil.

By the time the events related in this morning's text occur, a lot of water has gone under the bridge in the relationship between David and Absalom. Absalom, enraged at what his sister has experienced at the hands of his half-brother Amnon, nurses that anger for two years, he just stewes in it. He waits for David to say something, to do something about it. It feels like a tragedy is unfolding. David's permissiveness with Amnon then serves as the pretext for Absalom having Amnon killed. Then Absalom flees, and for three years he hides out in another country. And finally, after three years, David's heart goes out to him. Now wouldn't your heart go out after one day? Three years? And yet I think most of us know what that's like. It doesn't take someone murdering one of our children to know what it is to hold on to a grudge or a hurt.

David's heart finally goes out to Absalom, but even then, David can't bring himself to let Absalom see this. When Absalom is brought back, David says, "Let him go to his own house. I don't even want to see his face." That's what the Hebrew literally mean. "I don't want to see his face." Those words echo in the stories of every child who has been rejected by his or her family for marrying outside their race or religion, every child who has on the basis of sexual orientation or political preference been told they no longer have a place at their family's table. They echo in the stories of every person who has ever been told by a family member, "You are dead to me."

I once led a Bible study in the first church I served in which we were dealing with the question of God's unconditional love. I asked one of the participants, "If your daughter robbed a bank, would you stop loving her?" The mother said, "No, no, of course not." I pushed a little further. "What if your daughter killed someone? Would you stop loving her?" Again, the mother responded, "No. Not even then." So I went a little further, "Let's say your daughter came home and told you that she and girlfriend were moving in together, that they were in a committed relationship. Would you stop loving her then?" I was stunned, absolutely stunned, to hear these words, "If she told me that, I would tell her that she was no longer my child." I can't believe that. I mean, I don't care what you think about whether sexual orientation is a choice or not, how can you write your own child off?

I know as a father, as a spouse, and as a child myself, I know there are times when you can be so upset that you are better off taking a break, taking a time out, not seeing your parent or your child or even

your spouse for a time because you just know that if you see them right then, you are going to say the wrong thing. Am I right about that? Show of hands please. Yes? There are times when, for a brief time, we can say, "I no longer want to see your face." But to say, "I don't want to see your face," and to hold on to a grudge like that for years and years at a time - that's hard to fathom.

But that is precisely what David did. For two years he didn't see Absalom, and finally, Absalom, desperate for an audience, a reconciliation with his father, burns a field. Maybe if I set something on fire Dad will notice me? Talk about acting out behavior. Absalom does this. Now David finally invites Absalom in for a meeting. It's like being called into the office of the C.E.O. when you are his child, and you have to make an appointment to see Dad. I know, it's the royal family, and there's court protocol and all of that. But David calls Absalom in and David makes Absalom go through all the motions of bowing and scraping and putting his face on the ground before him, just like any other old subject, before he finally kisses him and they supposedly reconcile. But it is all a day late and a dollar short. Because if you know the rest of the story, you know that the very next thing Absalom does is to mount a rebellion against his father, and three or four chapters later he is killed, and only then, only then, does David call Absalom, "My son." It's tragic.

This week I set my mind to wondering how that story could have played out differently. What if David had seen Amnon's behavior and said, "Amnon, I'm no saint, but what you did was wrong."? What if David's heart had gone out to Absalom three years earlier than it did? What if David, when Absalom came into Jerusalem had said, "Son, I'm glad you are back," instead of "I don't want to his face."? What if, even at the last, when Absalom came into the throne room, David had said, "Stand up, my child, you don't need to bow and scrape before me. We are father and son here."?

This week I was talking with Flynn Bucy about asking people to do things in church. He said, "It is remarkable that we don't ask people to do things in church more than we do. What is it that stops us from asking someone to do something? You know what I think it is?" he said. "I think it is our ego. We don't want somebody to tell us no. But think of it in terms of cost-benefit analysis. All the time we get into a car, and some of us, (I won't say how many of us in this room), go over the speed limit. Getting in a car itself is dangerous. Going faster than the speed limit is more dangerous still. Yet people do it all the time. There is a risk to life and limb associated with that. But what's the risk associated with asking someone to do something in the church? Our ego might be a little bruised if they tell us no. What is the benefit? They get hooked in to the life-giving joy of being a part of a community of faith in action." Cost. Benefit.

There's a cost benefit analysis when it comes to relationships, too. And this Father's Day, if there is one person in this room who says, "You know, I think I'm done with that grudge." If there is one person in this room who says, "It is time to patch things up." If there is one person in this room who says, "I need to go to my daughter or my son or my father or my mother and say, 'I love you'," then this risky little sermon was worth it.

There is another story of fathers and sons. Jesus tells it. It is the story of a son who had the brazenness to come to his father and say, "Dad, I want my inheritance and I want it now," which would have been tantamount to saying, "I wish you were dead." The father replies, "Okay then, here you go."

The son goes off and he squanders it. When he comes back, do you know what the father does? Not this (arms crossed, frowning). Not even this (arms open in welcome). But something that would have utterly humiliated him in the eyes of his village. He picks up his robes, and looking like an absolute sissy, he runs to greet his child. And then he throws him a party, for God's sake. He throws him a party.

At the end of that marvelous movie, *The Bucket List*, you hear the strains of a song, written by John Mayer, and the song goes like this:

*Take all of your wasted honor, every little past frustration,
Take all of your so called "problems" better put them in quotations,
Say what you need to say.
Walking like a one man army, fighting with the shadows in your head,
Living out the same old moment, knowing you'd be better off instead
If you'd only say what you need to say.
Say what you need to say.
Have no fear for giving in. Have no fear for giving over.
You better know that in the end, it's better to say too much
Than never to say what you need to say again.
Say what you need to say.*

*Even if your hands are shaking, and your faith is broken
Even as the eyes are closing, do it with a heart wide open.
Say what you need to say.¹*

When you say it, remember what my mom says,

"Say what you mean, mean what you say, and don't be mean when you say it."

Use your words.

Thank you.

I'm sorry.

I love you.

I forgive you.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

¹ "Say" by John Mayer, 2007. You can find it on his album *Continuum*.