

Pentecost 10B
2 Samuel 18

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David & Absalom

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.

So the army went out into the field against Israel; and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. The men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the slaughter there was great on that day, twenty thousand men. The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword.

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. A man saw it, and told Joab, "I saw Absalom hanging in an oak." Joab said to the man who told him, "What, you saw him! Why then did you not strike him there to the ground? I would have been glad to give you ten pieces of silver and a belt." But the man said to Joab, "Even if I felt in my hand the weight of a thousand pieces of silver, I would not raise my hand against the king's son; for in our hearing the king commanded you and Abishai and Ittai, saying: For my sake protect the young man Absalom! On the other hand, if I had dealt treacherously against his life (and there is nothing hidden from the king), then you yourself would have stood aloof."

Joab said, "I will not waste time like this with you." He took three spears in his hand, and thrust them into the heart of Absalom, while he was still alive in the oak. And ten young men, Joab's armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him, and killed him...

Then Joab said to a Cushite, "Go, tell the king what you have seen." The Cushite bowed before Joab, and ran...

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." 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."

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!"

Have you ever faced the situation where a member of your family – perhaps a parent, sibling, or son or daughter – seems to continually make bad choices? It might be bad choices with alcohol or other drugs, it might be bad choices with money, it might be bad choices with the people with whom they associate. They make bad choices that hurt themselves or you and they drive you

crazy. But you love them, so you tend to be more forgiving of them than of someone else who might do the same thing. Things go better for awhile, and then they make another bad choice, exhibiting the same destructive behavior. Your friends tell you to just break off the relationship, that this person is beyond hope, is never going to change, but...the fact remains that you love them even though they continually break your heart. What are you supposed to do?

The story of Absalom is a long, multi-faceted story. This morning I'd like to look at it through David's eyes, through the eyes of a father who loves his son even though the son keeps breaking his heart.

Like most kings of 3,000 years ago, David had multiple wives and many concubines. This was partially due to the way political alliances were made in those days – if Israel was to make a treaty with the Ammonites, one of the ways this treaty was sealed was by having one king give his daughter to be the wife of the other king. I suppose the thinking was that a king was not likely to attack a city if he knew his daughter and grandchildren were there. Another reason for multiple wives was simply to show power, that the rules that applied to common people did not apply to the king.

By the time David became king of all Israel, and long before he had the affair with Bathsheba, David had at least six sons born to six different wives. (2 Samuel 3:2-5) This became the foundation for a very dysfunctional family. David's oldest son was Amnon. His third born son was Absalom, who had a sister, Tamar. 2 Samuel 13 tells the story of how Amnon lusted after his half-sister, Tamar. By pretending to be sick, he lures her to his room to feed him, only to rape her. King David finds out what has happened, but he lets this foul deed go unpunished because of his love for his firstborn son. Absalom is silently furious over what has happened to his sister, but keeps his rage at bay for two years before an opportunity arises where Amnon is away from Jerusalem. Absalom then murders Amnon to avenge his sister's honor and flees the country to avoid punishment.

David mourns the death of his first-born son, but at the same time he does not go after his son Absalom. After Absalom has been in exile for three years, David has another encounter like the one with the prophet Nathan, when Nathan told David a story to convict him of his sin regarding Bathsheba and Uriah. This time it is David's general, Joab, who gets David to convict himself. Joab arranges for a woman from Tekoa to tell David a story that she has two sons, one of which murders the other, and now she pleads that the remaining son not be put to death because that would only compound her grief. When David rules in her favor, she convinces David that, in the same way, he should be forgiving of Absalom and allow Absalom to return home. So David allows Absalom to return to Jerusalem, though for two years Absalom never comes into the king's presence. After a total of five years passes, Absalom formally asks for David's forgiveness and they are reconciled.

Absalom then proceeds on a personal public relations campaign that endears him to a sizeable portion of the people. For four years this young handsome man with the gorgeous hair systematically strengthens his political base until he feels he has enough support to overthrow his father and take the throne for himself. When David learns of the plot, he realizes the strength of Absalom's forces and flees Jerusalem, taking all his household with him except for ten concubines who are left behind to take care of the palace.

Absalom and his army come into Jerusalem unopposed. Absalom's political advisor tells him he should immediately do two things. First, he should publicly sleep with his father's concubines as

a sign of power so that the citizens would know that he has taken over his father's household and his father's throne. So Absalom sets up a tent on the roof of the palace so that all can see David's concubines going in to him.

The second piece of advice is to send his army to pursue David immediately in the hope that David could be captured and killed without a big battle between the armies. But another advisor, this one secretly loyal to David, says this is a poor choice because David is used to hiding in caves in the hill country from the days when Saul would pursue him. Better to let David get into a city where you can be certain of his location, then go after him with the army.

Absalom takes the second piece of advice and it turns out to be his downfall, for the extra time that passes gives David the opportunity to regroup his forces and better prepare for battle. This is the point where our lesson this morning picks up the story, with David dividing his forces into three groups to do battle with Absalom's army, but giving the specific order to not harm Absalom. David's experienced forces pick apart Absalom's enthusiastic but untrained army in the forests of Ephraim. Absalom tries to flee, only to somehow get his head caught in the branches of an oak tree, where Joab, the same general who had years earlier advocated that David should forgive Absalom, now administers justice for Absalom's act of treason and kills him.

David's grief at the news of Absalom's death is deep and real. Yes, Absalom had murdered his half-brother. Yes, Absalom had undermined David's authority as king. Yes, Absalom had tried to kill him, but above all else, Absalom was David's son, his beloved son. And David grieves, "Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son!"

I also need to tell you what happens next. When Joab learns that David is grieving for Absalom, Joab is furious. Joab gets in David's face and says, "Today you have covered with shame the faces of all your officers who have saved your life today, and the lives of your sons and your daughters...for you have made it clear today [by your grieving for Absalom] that commanders and officers are nothing to you; for I perceive that if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased." Those were true words, but hard for David to hear.

Having given you just that bare sketch of the story, I now want to go back to the issue I raised at the beginning – that of forgiving someone you love even though he or she time and again makes bad choices and hurts you.

About five years ago I read an article in The Lutheran magazine by Roy Lloyd entitled "Forgiveness: Key to the Future". Here, briefly, are his key points, some for which David provides a positive example and some for which he provides a negative example:

1. **Forgiveness is a process.** It is not something that happens immediately. The process of forgiveness often takes time—sometimes a great deal of time. It took David five years to forgive Absalom for murdering Amnon. To suggest that a person begin forgiving immediately ignores the necessary period of anger that precedes the forgiveness work. During this process, cycles of surprising anger may be followed by quiet. This isn't a reflection of moral weakness, but simply indicates more work needs to be done.
2. **Forgiveness is a gift we give first to ourselves, then to others.** This is because it frees us first. We are freed from the resentment to which we're entitled because we've been wronged. Bitterness does more damage to the person who carries it than the one to whom it is directed. The story told by the woman of Tekoa helped David realize this. Perhaps our

lives can't be put back together the way they were, but we don't need to diminish and cloud the rest of our lives with emotions that destroy us. That is why it is in our own best interest to forgive.

3. **Forgiveness does not condone what has happened and does not forget about justice.** It calls wrong wrong. It does not condone hurtful behavior or let the wrongdoer "off the hook". It recognizes that justice and forgiveness are distinct concepts. David gets mixed marks on this point, I think. He does not punish Amnon for the attack on Tamar. He does not punish Absalom for the murder of Amnon. Forgiveness doesn't mean that one necessarily forgoes justice. We are responsible for our actions, and appropriate penalties may apply when we wrong others. In Absalom's case, his attempt to overthrow and assassinate the king is a capital crime, and Joab was correct in that day and age to enforce the law of the land and administer the death sentence.
4. **Forgiveness does not mean forgetting.** Memories of wrongs done to us remain part of our life history. But they are transformed when we choose to forgive and move on with life. Nor does forgiveness mean that we become doormats. We don't have to remain in harm's way. Forgiveness doesn't mean you will continue to be a victim – as in abuse situations. Forgiveness doesn't mean that you continue to bail someone out every time they get themselves in a difficult situation. We can forgive, releasing our pain and resentment, but refuse to continue the relationship because it could be harmful for others or ourselves. As difficult as it may be when dealing with a loved one, forgiveness sometimes entails letting go.
5. **The last point is that forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation.** Forgiveness happens in us. It only takes one person to forgive, but reconciliation takes two – and the other person may not respond to our forgiveness or may be unwilling or unable to stop their destructive behavior. If there's a response, reconciliation may occur. But forgiveness doesn't depend on reconciliation.

As David grieves for Absalom, I think we see the evidence of forgiveness – not reconciliation, but forgiveness. David is gracious in forgiving because he knows he has been graciously forgiven. In Psalm 51, which David wrote after being confronted by Nathan, David confesses, "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, Lord, you alone, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." David can forgive Absalom because David knows he is just as great a sinner as his rebellious son.

I really appreciate the words of absolution that we have been using in the Order of Confession this summer. Listen to them again: "By the authority of Christ entrusted to the Church, I declare to you that Almighty God forgives your sin and grants you grace to forgive one another as you have been forgiven." We, like David, struggle with this concept of forgiveness. Sometimes we do pretty well at it. Other times, not so good. My word of encouragement to us as we struggle to forgive is to remind us that our ability to forgive others is not dependent on us, but is made possible only by the grace of God who takes the initiative and forgives us. Because we have been forgiven, we can forgive.