

“Practicing Pentecost: After a Broken Heart”

Rev. Tom Steffen

12 August 2018

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15-17, 31-33

The Scriptures say that in all of Israel there was none so beautiful as Absalom. From the sole of his feet to the top of his head, he was the picture of his father. Flowing reddish hair, darting deep brown eyes, strong arms, charismatic personality, a magnet of leadership and a magnet, too, for excesses. He was the cherished child of David, the one child who received that special measure of affirmation and love. Somewhere in 1 Kings it says that never did David displease his sons by saying that they could not do what they wanted to do. And the result? Absalom grows up to be a spoiled and belligerent child, a child who thinks he is greater than his father, a child who carefully causes a defection and later a split in David's kingdom. Absalom does it cleverly. He meets people as they come into the gate early in the morning. He talks to them about their grievances. “Oh, wouldn't it be wonderful,” he would say, “if there was someone in Israel to whom people with grievances could come and get an honest answer? Oh, I'll do that for you!” And so, he represents his father in hundreds of judgments, until finally he gathers around him many of the strong, young warriors of Israel. And then, he goes to his father and says: “I want to move to Hebron.” And David says: “Peace be to you, Absalom.”

Absalom takes the young warriors, the cream of the crop, and leads them out to the mountain of Ephraim. He assembles his troops and instructs them that when the trumpet sounds, all of the soldiers are to cry out: “Absalom is king in Hebron!” When the trumpet sounds, the cry rings out, and they turn and march on the city of Jerusalem. When word of the attack reaches Jerusalem and that Absalom is leading the armies, King David, the one who had built the greatest kingdom Israel had ever known, gathers his people, flees the city, over the Kidron Valley, across the Jordan, to a small city to hide in fear of his son. But in time, the king was reborn in him, and he calls the people together to devise a plan. The story indicates that the people would not let David lead the armies; he was allowed, however, to review the troops. And as they pass through the city gate he pleads with them: “Deal gently with Absalom, deal gently with Absalom.” It was a long battle that day. 20,000 men are slain. They push the armies of Absalom back into the woods where the strangest thing happens. Absalom's flowing hair gets caught in the branches of the twisted oaks, and he is pulled off his steed, left swinging back and forth as Joab, David's general, rides up and put three spears through his heart.

Did you know that just outside of Jerusalem, Absalom had already built himself a beautiful monument with the inscription: “Absalom, the king's son, the son of David?” But that is not where he is buried. After making a rough trench and digging it open, David's soldiers throw Absalom's body in it. Then they ride by and each throw in a bolder, crushing the body. Joab sends two messengers. The first one didn't have the heart to say the words. The second one did: “May it be done to everyone who rises up against the Lord my king what was done to that Absalom today.” And with that, David knows that the treasure of his heart, the one who was at the center of his tenderness is dead. He staggers up the steps to the room above the gate.

Can you see him? The great king of Israel, grasping the rail as he goes up, his new heart – the one we sang about last week – the heart for which he prayed after confessing to the horrible things he has done, is broken. Have you ever had your heart broken like that, broken by someone you loved and trusted? Child? Parent? Spouse? Associate or friend? Climb those stairs with David; you may recognize the pain that leads to these words: “Absalom, my son. Would that I had died for you, O Absalom, my son, my son.”

Let me offer three points as we conclude this three-week look into David's life. There are other lessons to be sure, and I'll trust the Spirit to reveal them to us in the coming days. Here's the first one: *Carefully containing our fascinations, curbing our appetites and taming our cravings, will prove indispensable for our own success and the wellbeing of others.* It is a hard lesson for us, one that I'm still trying to learn even as I try to avoid learning it. "More" is not always destructive, but more is always potentially dangerous. And "less," as the saying goes, is sometimes "more" in a good way, as long as living with less isn't a way of punishing ourselves and others; we dare not, we who are well heeled, dare not romanticize "less." The ancient rabbinic writings suggest that Absalom's long, flowing hair may be emblematic of his pride and his excesses; hair grows slowly and invisibly, but it can get out of hand. It would have been better had he trimmed it from time to time, especially if he was going to ride under low hanging trees.

Here's a second lesson: It would be a *very wise move for you and me to find a Nathan.* Remember Nathan from last Sunday, David's advisor turn prophet? Let's find someone, preferably not a spouse (or at least in addition to a spouse) who will hold us accountable and speak the truth even when it hurts. From what we know of David, it is clear that he was habitually excessive and ruthless, but Nathan wasn't intimidated by David's sin or repelled by David's brokenness. And both of them, together, learned to believe that God wasn't easily intimidated either. Do you have at least one person in your life who will help you confront your sin and brokenness, somebody sturdy enough to listen to it all, and someone who can help you seek the healing and hope that is available?

Lastly, as important as it is *to develop our natural abilities and gifts, it is more important, still, to develop our capacities for prayer and devotion.* Absalom no doubt worked at being a cunning leader and future king, and having studied his father he mastered a number of bad characteristics to which kings are prone to develop. But, perhaps Absalom didn't have a Nathan in his life who could point him to God. Nathan helped David to work at staying devoted to a forgiving God who expected more of David than David expected of himself. "Create in me a clean heart, and if you cast me not from your holy presence, oh, joy will be restored, the joy of thy salvation!" He didn't learn Psalm 51 in his war room; he learned it on his prayer rug while on his knees. As one writer, Douglas Steele, put it, "in prayer – not just prayer words but in a prayerful life – we become aware of what must be put right and the strength needed to put things right."

It is left to us to practice Pentecost after a broken heart. Will you? Will I?

Reading the news coverage of two cities and the people still weeping over them, I'm talking about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, I, too, wept this week and so did you, I suspect, in your own way. Regret comes only as we love, and the stronger our love the wetter our tears. David's love, in spite of his regrets that moved him to say, "Would that I had died for you," reminded me of the love, regret and the tears of Jesus who stands in the lineage of David. Weeping over the city of Jerusalem, Jesus says, "Oh, if you only knew what makes for peace." And to the women he meets on the way to the cross outside the same city, "Oh, daughters of Jerusalem, do not cry for me! Cry for yourselves and those you love."

As we weep our love, let us also pray for strength, strength to set things right, so that we may weep fewer tears of regret. Amen.