

Sermon: The Ambiguity of Fathers and Sons

Year B, Proper 14

[2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; Psalm 130; 1 Kings 19:4-8; Psalm 34:1-8; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51](#)

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If it's been a while since you've wandered through this particular part of the Bible, you may not have remembered that Absalom was David's son, at least until you get to the end of the reading. You can see from the bulletin that the reading has cut certain portions out. And we've taken a big jump from where we were last week in chapter 12 to this week's chapter 18.

Absalom is one of David's sons. Not all the sons have the same mother; David has multiple wives and concubines. Absalom's not the oldest son, that's Amnon. All of David's children are handsome, beautiful people.¹ In addition to David's looks, Absalom appears to have a share of David's political ambitions and ability to influence people.

Absalom has led a rebellion against his father. Absalom got political and military support from all parts of Israelite society. Remember that David formed a monarchy out of a tribal people. The battle being described today is a civil war. That's why the text says *the army went out into the field against Israel* (2 Samuel 18:6) and *the men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David* (2 Samuel 18:7). Absalom hasn't appealed to just one tribe over the other 11; he's pulled support from across all the tribes.² Absalom was so successful in winning people over to his side that he managed to run his father David out of Jerusalem. Just to underline how much mastery Absalom had over his father's world, Absalom takes over his father's concubines, proving that David cannot protect even those he was intimate with.

Absalom has started a civil war in Israel. All around Israel are the people which Israel has defeated under David, the Ammonites and Edomites and the Philistines. They are just waiting for Israel to wear itself out in a great blood bath, then swoop in and divide up what remains.

Everything David has worked for was in peril. But he was still a dad. He might not have been able to say to his three commanders, "Deal gently for my sake with *my son* Absalom." He says, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." (2 Samuel 18:5) That's a tricky needle to thread for the three commanders.³ David wants them to go out and win the war, put down the rebellion, but not kill or even really hurt the guy who led the coup. Plus, he says it in public where everyone hears it (2 Samuel 18:5). Pleading with the commanders to spare Absalom in public is not only a personal plea, it's a political policy. David is acting as king and as a dad.

When we hear that Absalom is killed, it sounds like he got what he deserved. Live by the sword, die by the sword kind of thing. We can understand his father's grief because Absalom was his son. No matter what else Absalom did, he was still David's son. We see David's terrible grief,

¹ Patrick J. Willson, "Proper 14, Homiletical Perspective, 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33" in *Feasting on the Word: Year B Additional Essays*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012], 2.

² Jacob Weingreen, "Rebellion of Absalom." *Vetus Testamentum* 19, no. 2 (1969): 263.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 317 .

we recognize ourselves when he says *would that I had died instead of you* (2 Samuel 18:33). But in the end, Absalom had made his choice and this is the natural outcome of it.

Except, how did Absalom manage to get such wide-ranging support? David was an amazing leader and anointed by God to be the King of Israel. David had led the fight to establish Israel as a nation, had defeated some fierce enemies, had united the tribes. Why would so many people leave his side and take the perilous step to support Absalom? Why would any community which had been fighting for its survival for years risk everything they had gained to fight each other?

David's oldest son, Amnon, was the crown prince. He decided he wanted to sleep with his half-sister, David's daughter, Tamar. When she refused, he raped her. When she protested, saying publicly and loudly what had happened to her, David did less than nothing. He threw her out of his house. David doesn't punish Amnon, doesn't disinherit him, doesn't send him away. It's Absalom who takes Tamar in. Absalom plots for two years before he's able to avenge Tamar by killing Amnon.

If you're the king and you need more and more and more men to fight your battles for you, against the Ammonites and the Edomites and the Philistines, they have to believe that the women they leave behind will be safe enough to leave behind. If David cannot protect his own daughter, in his own house from his own son, is he really worth fighting for? Yes, rape is a terrible thing and no one wants their son to be a rapist, but if you can't figure out how to handle your son who has raped your daughter, can you really handle the very tough work of being the king? Plus there can't be one set of rules for the king's sons and another for everyone else's.

Perhaps the guy who was willing to kill his half-brother, the crown prince, is a better bet. Perhaps the guy who was willing to call out his father for dropping the ball is the right guy to be king. Especially since, with Amnon's death, Absalom is now next in line for the throne. If Absalom is going to be king anyway and David has shown he's not really up to the job, then maybe it's time for Absalom to take over. Especially if the God of Israel demands that everyone care for the widows and orphans and foreigners among them, the most vulnerable citizens in their midst.

In light of what happened to Tamar and Amnon, perhaps when we hear David's heartbroken cry at the end of the reading, we can hear David grieving for what he had done to Absalom. David's inaction with Amnon put Absalom in a terrible position. Absalom took a dreadful action, but David had a role in that.

So did Absalom get what he deserved? Did David? Remember last week, once Nathan called David on the sins he committed because of his actions with Bathsheba and Uriah. The prophet Nathan, speaking for God, said, *Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, and have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife. Thus says the LORD: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house; and I will take your wives before your eyes, and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this very sun.* (2 Samuel 12:9-11)

So is all this fighting and Absalom's very public commandeering of David's concubines just God working out punishment for David's sin? There isn't an earthquake or tornado, no act of God, there isn't a convenient prophet in this part of the story turning up who says, in effect, "God told

me what was going on and here's the deal." There's isn't some subtle, sneaky inside baseball bit of Hebrew that provides the interpretive clue on how to handle this text. There's no later editor coming in five hundred year after the event happened, when it was all being written down, who adds a comment about who's the good guy and who's the bad guy in this situation. Nothing clarifies whether all of this is God fulfilling God's promise or David and Absalom stumbling around in their own limitations and dragging the rest of Israel around with them. It's ambiguous.

We are left with our questions. Was David supposed to be more of a king or more of a dad when he dealt with Absalom? Or Amnon? Or Tamar? Was Absalom supposed to be more obedient to his father or more strident in his defense of some of God's other laws? If God is intervening, how does an intervention this subtle make it clear the lessons we're supposed to learn from David's or Absalom's behavior? If God wants a just and righteous king on the throne of Israel, how is that going to be possible when David is so utterly broken in his grief? About the only lesson to take from this whole ambiguous story is to not bring your whole self to anything, not being a king or a prince or a son or a father.

Except for the rest of the lessons from the Bible. Today's reading from Ephesians, for instance, says, *Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.* (Ephesians 4:31-32). It doesn't say don't feel all those things. It says feel all those things and then find a way through them to kindness, tenderheartedness, forgiveness. I think there is an image of being a good Christian as being some kind of happy-clappy, never-cursing, sunshine girl. Or being a good Christian is judging everyone's sins and if you are not too much of a hypocrite, acknowledging your own sins. Especially if you can point out that they are so much smaller than everyone else's.

To me, that is bringing only a part of ourselves to the challenge of living faithfully in this world. There are things which will make you angry or cause your fear or lead you to grief. It seems to me the Bible is about being fully human, and feeling all those emotions. As a Christian, I have to feel all those emotions, including or especially anger, and then I have to find a way to kindness, tenderheartedness, forgiveness. I have to use all of myself, to find a way to speak up, and *to live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us* as it says in Ephesians 5:2.

And I won't know when to do what or what to do. I will need to be the minister and the daughter and the sister and the aunt and the friend and the citizen and the Christian and the woman and the neighbor. And I'll need to be Catherine Anne Merrill. And the only thing I know for sure is that I won't get it right. God will work through me and alongside the actions I take. I will work against God's intentions in this world. Some of my decisions will have consequences I could never have foreseen. Some of my actions will have exactly the consequences I knew they would when I did them and I did them anyway. It's going to be ambiguous.

What opened David's eyes to his sin against Bathsheba and Uriah and God was the story Nathan told about the rich man who stole the poor man's sheep. David that that the rich man should be punished because had stolen the sheep and because he had no pity (2 Samuel 12:6), he had no compassion. Where is the compassion in the reading we heard today? For Absalom, Amnon, Tamar, David? When we only bring part of ourselves, we can stop well short of compassion. But when we bring all of ourselves, we find unexpected ways to do what Ephesians urges us to do: *putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin ... Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what*

is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.
(Ephesians 4:25-26, 29) I cannot do that drawing on only part of myself. I probably can't do that bringing my whole self to it. I have to rely on God as well. Especially in the face of ambiguity. Because God's presence with me is the only unambiguous part of the story.