



“Betwixt and Between”

Scripture – 2 Samuel 18, selected verses

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Randall T. Clayton

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A number of years ago there was a book published that was entitled, “*The Flawed Family of God: Stories about Imperfect Families in Genesis*,”¹ But flawed, imperfect and dysfunctional families are not limited to the first book of the Bible. For instance, there’s David’s family. David may have killed a giant with a sling shot, he may have been a great warrior, he may have united a people, and maybe even wrote some psalms, but his actions were all too often based on his own wants and his own desires, and not necessarily what was good for creation and the future of his family or his country. Case in point: terrible story of what David did to Bathsheba. David saw her. David desired her. David forced his way on her. And then as if all that were not bad enough, he arranged to have her husband killed so that no one would know the child Bathsheba was bearing was his. Those bad decisions and actions set in motion a series of events that were unfortunate, painful, devastating, and death dealing which seem to culminate in the story I am about to share with you.

Hear now sections of the 18th chapter of 2 Samuel, which recounts what happens after David’s son Absalom tried to usurp the throne from his father David. Then David mustered the men who were with him...And David divided the army into three groups: one-third under the command of Joab, one-third under the command of Abishai..., Joab’s brother, and one-third under the command of Ittai the Gittite. The king said to the men, ‘I myself will also go out with you.’ But the men said, ‘You shall not go out. For if we flee, they will not care about us. If half of us die, they will not care about us. But you are worth ten thousand of us; therefore, it is better that you send us help from the city.’⁴The king said to them, ‘Whatever seems best to you I will do.’ So the king stood at the side of the gate, while all the army marched out...The king gave orders to 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 [that would be Absalom’s forces] were defeated there by the servants of David... 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 life²⁵ (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...

Now David was sitting between the two gates. The sentinel went up to the roof of the gate by the wall, and when he looked up, he saw a man running alone.²⁵ The sentinel shouted and told the king. The king said, 'If he is alone, there are tidings in his mouth.' He kept coming, and drew near.²⁶ Then the sentinel saw another man running; and the sentinel called to the gatekeeper and said, 'See, another man running alone!' The king said, 'He also is bringing tidings.' The sentinel said, 'I think the running of the first one is like the running of Ahimaaz son of Zadok.' The king said, 'He is a good man, and comes with good tidings.' Then Ahimaaz cried out to the king, 'All is well!' He prostrated himself before the king with his face to the ground, and said, 'Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delivered up the men who raised their hand against my lord the king.' The king said, 'Is it well with the young man Absalom?' Ahimaaz answered, 'When Joab sent your servant, I saw a great tumult, but I do not know what it was.' The king said, 'Turn aside, and stand here.' So he turned aside, and stood still. Then the [second runner, a] 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 that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!' ⁱⁱ

They say that apples do not always fall far from the tree. And we know that children sometimes repeat the sins of their parents, that cycles of violence in one generation sometimes spawn violence in the next, and dysfunction in one generation can easily give rise to dysfunction in the following. Such was the case in David's family. David's oldest child, and the one in line to be king upon David's death was a boy named Amnon. Like his father David, Amnon decided that whatever he wanted, and whomever he wanted was his without regard to the other person's feelings or desires. One day, Amnon raped his sister Tamar. One might think or hope that David would have been angry with Amnon and would have held him to account. Not David. He ignored it, washing his hands of it, saying he "loved" his son too much to discipline him. (Really? That's love?)

Another of David's sons, Absalom, was furious with Amnon for what he did, terribly angry that their dad was not holding Amnon accountable, so he decided to take justice into his own hands. Now while Absalom was motivated by a desire to get even and avenge Amnon's violation of his sister, I think he was also motivated by his own desire to inherit David's kingdom and realized Amnon stood in the way of accomplishing that since Amnon was the first-born son. With a desire for retribution, and a desire to become king, Absalom murdered his brother. (Talk about a dysfunctional family! – rape, murder, scheming, violence – dysfunctional families are not limited to the first book of the Bible). After he

murdered his brother, Absalom fled the country and lived in exile for several years until David invited him back home, but the deal was that he would be under house arrest when he returned. Absalom agreed to the deal. After several years of house arrest, David finally let him go free. Having been stuck in the house for years, with resentment toward his father growing each passing day, and wanting to be king himself sooner rather than later, and still probably seething that David had not held Amnon accountable for what he did to their sister, once he was free to interact with the people, he began a campaign to overthrow his father.

One of the tactics he used was to go out every day to the gates of the city. As people entered seeking justice or a judgment for something he would say, "See, your claims are good and right, but there is no one deputized by the king to hear you... If only I were to judge the land...I would give you justice." Of course, none of that was true, but how often do politicians stretch the truth or tell us outright lies to get elected? Absalom's good looks, charming personality, and his words and promises made him exceedingly popular with the people, creating the opportunity for him to form an army and engineer a coup against his father. He was quite successful in this attempt, ultimately, he was able to push David and David's senior military commanders out of Jerusalem.

Though David was down, he was not totally out. David organized those people and forces still loyal to him and got ready to go to battle to take his kingdom back. On the eve of the battle, David was prepared to lead the troops onto the battlefield, when his military commanders told him "No, we can't take the risk of losing you." And so, David stayed behind. It is interesting to me how little it seemed to take to get David, known for his battlefield prowess, to decide to stay behind. While perhaps the advice to stay behind was sage, after all David could not take the kingdom back if he were killed in battle, I think it is quite possible given David's political prowess that there was another reason that David readily agreed to stay on the sidelines of the war. As has been suggested, perhaps David realized that the only way he was going to re-claim his throne was if Absalom died in battle. As long as Absalom lived, those who were loyal to him would remain loyal to him, not David. Given Absalom's popularity with the people, David needed to have some distance from that death if he hoped to win over those who supported and loved Absalom. If he were on the battlefield when Absalom died, Absalom's followers might blame the death on David and never return to David's fold. Though he was easily convinced to stay behind, David told his troops that he wanted them to "deal gently" with Absalom. But what did that mean? Did he mean that they were not to kill Absalom if they found him even though he was a traitor? Or did he mean they should kill him as quickly as possible, so Absalom did not suffer? Or were those instructions really another way of distancing himself from Absalom's likely death so that those who were allied with Absalom would not blame David and would gravitate toward him again? David was a savvy politician, after all.

The battle between David's forces and Absalom's was fierce and wide ranging, with much of it happening in forested areas. During that battle scripture says that Absalom was killed by David's forces when they found him hanging between heaven and earth because his long hair had gotten caught in a tree limb. Now normally upon hearing that your troops had been victorious the commander in chief would be thrilled, but in this case, David's reaction upon hearing the news that Absalom was dead was a heart-rending cry that has reverberated through time...

Oh my son Absalom, my son, my son...
Would that I had died instead of you...
Oh my son Absalom, my son...my son.

I think that the death of a child is about the worst grief of all, and despite the fact that Absalom was a traitor, David loved him, and Absalom's death shattered his heart into tiny pieces.

Oh my son Absalom, my son...my son...

When we grieve the loss of a loved one, we naturally reflect on that relationship and often begin to reassess our actions, our words, sometimes wishing we had done or said something different while our loved one was alive. Sometimes part of grief then is remorse. That makes me wonder if part of David's cry was a growing realization of the role he had played in Absalom's death and the terrible dysfunction of his family wrought by his bad choices and misplaced priorities. Perhaps part of what was tearing his heart apart was guilt and remorse that he was feeling over the part he had played that had led to his beloved son's death. What if he had made different choices...better choices...more faithful choices? If he had, perhaps the coup would not have happened; perhaps Absalom would be alive – and Amnon too and Tamar whole. What if his priorities more nearly matched those of God's? While Absalom clearly dangled between heaven and earth just before he died, as I think of David's life, I have this sense that in some way he lived between heaven and earth too...or rather, betwixt and between his desires for what he wanted, and doing what was right; betwixt and between what was politically expedient for him for the moment, and doing what would be best for generations to come; betwixt and between seeking what he wanted no matter the cost to others or to his family, and creating a family and a country that would indeed be able to live fully and completely in peace, harmony, and love.

And I wonder if as he mourned Absalom's death, he was beginning to see that his bad choices and misplaced priorities had set in motion outcomes that echoed through the years and now tore apart his heart as they had torn apart the family too. Between heaven and earth. Betwixt and between. Betwixt and between the demands of work and the needs of family. Betwixt and between the need to earn a living and accomplish career goals, and the need and desire to watch our children grow up and fully be a part of their lives. Betwixt and between the command to worship God and a calendar that is full of sports, and entertainment. Betwixt and between God's call to welcome the immigrant, and the alien, and the stranger, and the deep internalized fears we have of those who are different. Betwixt and between the need to care for the environment so our children and grandchildren can have life, and the sometimes-difficult changes we would need to make to protect the environment for generations to come. Betwixt and between the call to love like Jesus and offer forgiveness generously and a desire for retribution and getting even. Betwixt and between a short-term gain of us or our companies or households, and long-term possibilities for everyone. Betwixt and between. Like David. Hanging between heaven and earth. Like Absalom.

In his reflection on this passage, Frederick Buechnerⁱⁱⁱ once wrote: "When they broke the news [of Absalom's death] to David, it broke his heart, just as simple as that, and he cried out in words that have echoed down the centuries ever since. 'O my son, Absalom, my son, my son. Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son.' He meant it, of course. If he could have done the boy's dying for him, he would have done it. If he could have paid the price for the boy's betrayal of him, he would have paid it. If he could have given his own life to make the boy alive again, he would have given it. But even a king can't do things like that. As later history was to prove, it takes a God." Sometimes the choices we make do have consequences that reverberate through the generations. Indeed, we live in a broken world. But the Good News of the Gospel is that God is ever ready to reach out to us and show us the way. Because

of what God has done in Jesus Christ, we have new possibilities to choose heaven, living not just between heaven and earth, betwixt and between, but to choose to live as if heaven were right now here on earth. When we do we end up making choices that plant the seeds of life not just for us, but for those who will follow. Apples, after all, do not always fall far from the trees; cycles of violence and dysfunction can indeed be broken.

Prayers of the People ~ Randall Clayton

Gracious God, in Jesus Christ, you have given us new opportunities to live fully, and yet all too often we ignore what we should pay attention and avoid the sometimes-difficult work required so that future generations can have life. Help us, O God, to lean into your everlasting arms for energy and vision; and let us lean on your everlasting arms when our courage to be your people lags, or our desire to be who you call us to become fails. Help us to choose to live as if heaven were indeed on earth, making choices and setting priorities that nurture our relationship to you, and build a community that knows the fullness of life you desire.

We pray for those who are hurting – hurting because of misplaced priorities and bad decisions...and for those who are hurting physically or emotionally due to an illness or life condition...bring healing and hope where little is felt or known.

We pray for those who are in war torn parts of the globe. Give the world's leaders the wisdom to know the things that make for peace, and the will to seek it. Show us what we can do to end the violence that washes over the streets and towns around the globe. We pray, O God, for the Middle East, for Congo, for Guatemala, and for all the places across the globe that this congregation has a special relationship. And we pray for ministries in this community who are seeking to alleviate human need in our own town. Bring funding where funding is needed, hands where they are needed, and vision enough to know how to end poverty and hunger.

For those who mourn this day, we ask for your special embrace – where hearts are breaking over a loss, let the waters of your love be a comforting balm.

We pray O God for this church – may we be a beacon of your hope and a witness to your saving grace in ways that speak in this new day and time. We ask these things, remembering the prayer which Jesus taught us. **“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.”**

ⁱ Hesel, Carolyn B and Park, Song-Mi Suzie, *The Flawed Family of God: Stories about Imperfect Families in Genesis*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2021.

ⁱⁱ New Revised Standard Version, © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

ⁱⁱⁱ Buechner, Frederick, *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who*, Harper & Row, 1979, p. 5 – 6.