

"More Bible Stories: Amnon, Tamar and Absalom:
There's Not Much Fun in Dysfunction"
2 Samuel 13:20-39, and Luke 18:9-14
Rev. Pat Weatherwax Sept 16, 2018

INTRODUCTION

This text and sermon is a chronological step backward, if you heard or read our previous sermon in the series of Bible Stories. The last time I brought the message we spoke about when Absalom died. We talked about the grief of losing someone you love, especially when it's your child. This is the story happens *before* that. Boys behaving badly. How did the family get so dysfunctional? What do we learn from the stories of the Hebrew Bible that helps us with living our Christian life?

CONTEXT

Remember that David had many children with at least three wives and several concubines. And Michal the wife who wasn't impressed with David's dancing in only an apron was childless. So there were half and full siblings. That's got to be a self-image issue, "who's your mom"? David's adult kids were guilty of sexual assault, lying, cheating, murder, deception and hate. It seems that the conflicts started when Amnon raped his half sister. The assumption in brother Absalom's mind was "we will take care of this". Well, "King David heard the news and became very angry, but he did not want to say anything to upset Amnon, because he loved him." So Absalom took care of it 2 years later by commissioning his brother's murder and scaring the whole family. Then he fled to his maternal grandpa's kingdom for sanctuary.

And "David cried for his son every day." He also grieved for the absence of his avenging son. I can't imagine that grief of losing so much. We do know that there has been terrible inter-relational pain in almost every family since the beginning. In some it is a brief interlude and in others it seems to be nearly constant.

L.R. Knost, who writes about what she calls "gentle parenting" (Jesus, the Gentle Parent: Gentle Christian Parenting, Little Hearts Handbooks) summed life with a family this way:

Life is amazing. And then it's awful. And then it's amazing again. And in between the amazing and awful it's ordinary and mundane and routine. Breathe in the amazing, hold on through the awful, and relax and exhale during the ordinary. That's just living heartbreaking, soul-healing, amazing, awful, ordinary life. And it's breathtakingly beautiful.

We are here to learn from the scriptures and from each other about when life isn't so beautiful.

LESSONS

Again, as with other David stories, adults, in this case **the adult kids, ignore God, and others in their lives feel the consequences.** Amnon assaulted his half sister Tamar,

causing her to have significant emotional distress. The anger and grief of her big brother Absalom caused more trouble.

Who is responsible for their behavior? And why is that our first question? Are we the like the Pharisee who promotes our goodness to God, or are we the tax collector who admits that we are, ourselves, in need of God's mercy?

Every compulsion, addiction, every sin can be stronger than *our will and our self-control*. The first steps (literally the first three of 12 steps) address personal accountability and surrender. As outlined in the original *Big Book* and presented by AA are:

1. Admitting powerlessness over the struggle
2. Believing that a higher power can help
3. Deciding to turn control over to the higher power

We are accountable for our own actions but we are never as strong alone as we are with God in control.

So we also need to learn: **God loves your kids more than you do. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ, Romans 8:38**

Every addict, every thief and everyone who uses a gun to scare or harm another, besides being someone in trouble with the authorities, is also someone's child. Every drunk driver or person behind bars or homeless (or not homeless!) panhandler is someone's baby, created and loved by God. They are someone's child and everyone is God's child and loved (1 John 3). And so we are called to love even "those".

Chuck DeGroat, a current professor of pastoral care at Western Seminary, in his book "The Toughest People to Love" says this: "In the upside-down economy of Jesus, those closest to the bottom are nearest to grace. ... In fact if you take the words of Jesus seriously, the religiously put together, the rich, and the secure are far less apt to beg for grace." DeGroat's reminder is that everyone should be identified as "Child of God" above and before being labeled as addict, thief, criminal.

That's what the passage from Luke 18 reminds us that the one who knows honestly and admits truthfully their own failing, are the ones who are justified, made right with God.

Parents get to decide what their response will be, when to say they are instigating tough love, when to forgive. David decided not to confront Amnon. You may remember he later allowed Absalom to return to the family. David did what he did. Period. Keep in mind that this was a very different culture, without the legal and social agencies we have to call on. But, then or now, only those closest to a situation get to decide how to respond to their adult child. One parent whose son struggled with narcotics, used the phrase: "Not tough love but maybe love from a distance".

Another mom I know, a beautiful caring local Christian parent has an adult son who struggles with heroin addiction. She could be you. Maybe she is you. She wrote this for me to share today:

"Over 20+ years I have dealt with a son with substance abuse problems. I knew he may have some heritage with additions. My brother had a drinking problem

as well as my husband never knows when to say no. But the Heroin abuse had never been a problem in my family or my husband's. Alcohol was the start and it kept going south from there. The guilt my husband and I feel started out years ago at such a feverish pace it was hard to get up in the morning. I personally backed myself out of groups for fear someone would approach me on it. My oldest son was irate all the time telling me what I should do, certainly not helping me cope. Over the years the sting still happens but the coping is learned to the point you can function. The answer is never clear and I do not have a hardened heart to make the move to quit caring. Hope remains a never ending factor to cling to, even though it seems we are in the groundhog day scenario of detox, clean, slide back, jail, Repeat yearly.

Unfortunately the only way to know how it feels is experience it. And again unfortunately it is happening to people and families far too often. I always say God gave me this as a burden, so I can help others unload theirs.

Hope this has some meaning for someone. It is hard to describe and never can be translated to others who are not of the mind see addiction is an illness, and not a choice."

Two statements in her note that I want to point out: She wrote: " I do not have a hardened heart to make the move to quit caring," She has made the decision to respond to her son with repeating grace and assistance. Not everyone will do it that way. That's a personal family decision, they **get to decide what their response will be.**

But the other thing she said that I want you to hear. She wrote: "I personally backed myself out of groups for fear someone would approach me on it." Hear well. God wants us to have and be understanding friends. Understanding Christian friends are not judgemental or pushy. It doesn't take much effort to convey support and empathy. It doesn't take much for a grieving parent to isolate themselves, if they don't feel safe or comfortable with people knowing their struggles.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY

So then, what should we do? We, who deal with family dysfunction and we, who see other families struggling? It was the Apostle Paul who told us that, to fulfill the law of Christ, we must bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2). But it was the writers of the *Belhar Confession* who rightly added a word that is an encouragement to those who are in isolation. "In order for a burden to be borne, it must first be known."* Our Belhar Confession says: for unity within the people of God, we

together **know** and bear one another's burdens,
 thereby fulfilling the law of Christ ;
 that we need one another and upbuild one another,
 admonishing and comforting one another;
 that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness;
 pray together; together serve God in this world;
 and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity.

(1 Corinthians 12:24b–28, Ephesians 3:14–20, Galatians 6:2, 2 Corinthians 1:3–4.
*Citing Belhar, Kate Kooyman, Perspectives blog, “Be Known”)

We have compassion for others *and ourselves*. If we aren't the most amazing parent with the perfect children we cut ourselves some slack. As Jesus explained it, most people forget to look at their faults before seeing the fault in someone else (Matthew 7:5). When it comes to our adult children we see their faults as our own. How do we help an addict or the family member of an addict or a grieving person? **Compassion!** Weep with those who weep and mourn with those who mourn (Romans 12). Pray without ceasing, when they are healthy and when they are struggling..

We show **empathy** toward the one who struggles. The saddest phrase from the Luke 18:9 text: “trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt”. Show empathy to struggling people and their families, not contempt.

And **surrender** the attempts to control others, because only God can change a person's heart and mind and strength. Your child, parent, grandchild, friend, self. Acknowledge all of us are powerless without God's love and power. Surrender all.

Promote Hope, when dealing with others. Believe that each new day brings hope for change and sobriety and overcoming temptation. Believe that wounds can heal. Have hope for reconciliation and renewed relationships. Because:

CONCLUSION:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end;
They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

“The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.”

The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.

It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

Lamentations 3:21-26

How did the family of David get so dysfunctional? Is the grief of adult- children behaving badly similar to experiencing them dying? I leave that for grieving parents to decide, but I stand on Lamentations 3. “We wait for the salvation of the Lord”. And because we waited, we know how the story of David's family turns out.

“Joseph left Nazareth, a town in Galilee, and went to the town of Bethlehem in Judea. It was known as the town of David. Joseph went there because he was from the family of David. Joseph registered with Mary because she was engaged to marry him. (She was now pregnant.) While Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem, the time came for her to have the baby. She gave birth to her first son. She wrapped him up well and laid him in a box where cattle are fed.” (Luke 2:4-7)

Thirty years after that, people with struggles of all kinds called out “Jesus, son of David, help us” (Mark 10:47, etc). People today need to do the same. Jesus, another son of David, help us. Amen