



“Tragedy in Our Families”

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Scripture (NRSV):

II Samuel 18:5-17a, 24, 31-33

⁵The king, (David) 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.

⁶So the army went out into the field against Israel; and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. ⁷The men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the slaughter there was great on that day, twenty thousand men. ⁸The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword.

⁹Absalom 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. ¹⁰A man saw it, and told Joab, “I saw Absalom hanging in an oak.” ¹¹Joab 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.” ¹²But 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! ¹³On 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.” ¹⁴Joab 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. ¹⁵And ten young men, Joab’s armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him, and killed him.

¹⁶Then Joab sounded the trumpet, and the troops came back from pursuing Israel, for Joab restrained the troops. ¹⁷They took Absalom, threw him into a great pit in the forest, and raised over him a very great heap of stones.

²⁴ 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.

³¹ Then the Cushite (runner) came; and the runner 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.” ³² The king said to the runner, “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.”

³³ 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!”

Sermon:

My family has three generations of social workers in our midst: my maternal grandmother was a social worker, two of my four sisters are social workers, and my daughter is a social worker.

They have made it their careers to help others: in hospitals, in the military, for girls off the streets of Philadelphia, for parents, for teachers and for children.

In their various professions, they seek to heal the physical and psychic wounds that human beings carry.

And in their work, they have seen these wounds passed from generation to generation. Addiction, or violence, or some other kind of suffering...from parent to child, from one generation to the next generation.

Scripture this morning shows us this suffering passing from one generation to the next. King David, caught up in family secrets, caught up in family dysfunction, sees one of his sons lead an uprising to grab the throne.

And here, we hear of the misery behind the conflict and shame, the anger and hurt, secrets and lies buried within the royal family of David. The rebellious son is destroyed by the general of the king, Joab.

Joab is not a nice man at all, he has heard the king speak of protecting his wild and power hungry son, but chooses to end the conflict between them with brutal efficiency; murder the son, end the rebellion. End of story.

But that is never the end of the story. King David is heartbroken. His power is protected, but his son is dead.

He weeps and wails, calling out the name of a child he has loved and lost.

We can have compassion on this elderly man, weeping for a son, can we not?

A million, million parents across the world and across time, have done the same...seen a child destroyed, and wept at their loss, broken-hearted and wretched?

Today's story is just one example of the high cost of keeping family secrets, not sharing the truth, not responding to your better angels but being led by fear or the hunger for power. David lies and kills, and his children do the same. From generation to generation...the sickness follows them, they suffer time and again.

If only they had had a social worker to help them, or a mental health counselor to help them?

If only there had been a doctor to save the child, or a mentor to steer them in a different direction, or a friend to comfort them, instead of the lonely, destructive path they took?

In this ancient story, you are left wondering about the path not taken, about the truth not told, about the confession and reconciliation left undone.

What if?

The truth is, I believe there is always the promise of change held out to others, and to us. It is possible to do the hard work of healing the wounds.

There is the possibility of developing the strength to endure, the resilience to overcome the tribulations, the horrors, and live a life of meaning and joy and hope.

Sometimes there is even the possibility of reconciliation.

It may be the work of a lifetime, but social workers and therapists, and counselors and pastors like me, all strive to show the possibilities of breaking out of the cycles of family pain, like David's family pain.

They won't do it for you, but they can share the tools they know, and offer the support you need, and challenge you too...

There are people all around you, perhaps sitting quietly next to you, who are people of resilience, of finding their power to break out of the patterns of pain that exist, even from generation to generation.

It isn't magic, and it isn't easy.

But at least in this pastor and in this church, you will indeed hear that counselors, and therapists and social workers and psychologists and mentors and ministers and coaches and teachers...are all available to God's people, as tools of God's gift of healing. Do not be afraid of their skills and their assistance in healing.

Because this is also true: God does not design the world for suffering. God's intention for creation was for good, and for beauty, for wholeness and for life.

Mighty King David, the one who united the north and the south into one nation.

He had his demons too.

He was flawed, and fearful. Lustful, ambitious, scheming.

He needed the help of a good counselor, of social workers to help him with his complicated family system...!

No family, from the greatest and most powerful, to the simplest or poorest...is exempt from the pain of brokenness, of secrets and fears, of suffering. Maybe that is why David's story is still told, even to this day. And as broken as he was, he was also a person who sought to follow God's leading in his life. Broken as he was, he would lean on God's guidance and ask forgiveness, and listen to God's prophets, again and again.

- Maybe the world didn't have therapists then, or not in a form we would easily recognize, but both therapists and prophets urge us to look for the truth, and speak it.
- Both challenge us with our comfortable lies, our ability to ignore the difficult.
- Both prophets and therapists urge us to recognize our responsibility for our choices and our lives.
- Both urge us to do the hard work of truth and justice with forgiveness, compassion and love for ourselves and for all the others; that is the true work of full human lives.

This is hard work. But it is powerful. It is healing. It can change the world, because as we are changed, we change the world. No family, whether famous or forgotten, is exempt from brokenness; no family is beyond hope of restoration-if not in one generation, then in the next. So do not despair, do not give up.

And why can I say this?

Because, I live in a family of social workers! And my social work family members, friends and colleagues have seen it - again and again and again. Healing, forgiveness, resilience, courage, and hope.

You can, too!

So let us pray for journeys of healing, and for courageous, resilient lives, for restoration and reconciliation between our broken human world.

In the power of God to heal and renew....Amen.