

Sermon-8/9/09 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Life Is Messy”
Ps. 130 and 2 Sam. 18: 5, 9-15, 24-33

In order to fully appreciate our second reading for today, we will need to know some of what came before the events this passage recounts. Second Samuel reads like an “R” rated soap opera! Let me bring you up to speed.

A couple of weeks ago we read about David falling in lust with another man’s wife, Bathsheba. He ends up sleeping with her and gets her pregnant. Trying to cover up his sin eventually leads him to one of the most despicable acts in all the Bible. He has his general leave Uriah in the thick of battle leading to his death when his companions pull back leaving him alone and vulnerable.

David learns from the prophet Nathan that God is not pleased. There will be consequences for his actions. And, boy, are there consequences! First, David’s eldest son, Amnon, proves to be a chip off the old block. He falls in lust with his half sister, Tamar. When Tamar does not reciprocate that love, he rapes her. Tamar is Absalom’s full sister.

Sadly, David is a weak father and does nothing to discipline Amnon. Absalom takes the situation into his own hands and “punishes” Amnon. He gets him drunk and has one of his servants kill him. Then he flees for his life.

Eventually, after three years he returns to Jerusalem and is forgiven by his father, David. We need to know Absalom is a very charismatic character who happens to be good looking to boot. Here is what Second Samuel says about him in 14:25-26. “Now in all Israel there was no one to be praised so much for his beauty as Absalom; from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head there was no blemish in him. When he cut the hair of his head (for at the end of every year he used to cut it; when it was heavy on him, he cut it), he weighed the hair of his head, two hundred shekels by the king’s weight.”

Absalom would have been right at home in the 60’s in this country. That thick, long hair was to prove his undoing later on. After awhile, Absalom becomes more popular in Israel than his father. David has to flee his home. While David is away Absalom makes himself at home with his father’s concubines. Soon he plans a coup.

David has no choice. He must take back his country from his son. Being the brilliant military strategist he is, he hatches a plan to defeat Absalom. It is here where we enter our text for today. Listen for what the Spirit is saying to the church this day. (Read 2 Sam. 18:5, 9-15, 24-33).

What are we to do with this sordid tale? The obvious first observation is: life is messy. It is not just messy for ordinary folks. It is messy for one of the greatest heroes in the Old Testament. David’s family is as dysfunctional as the rest of our families. Actually, I hope his family is more dysfunctional than yours!

The longer I live, the more I realize no family is perfect. In fact most families are far from perfect, including my own family of origin. I am just back from my family's annual reunion camp in the Redwoods. We end up telling stories about our childhood as we sit around the campfire. On the way home I stopped by my brother's home. More stories came out about what we all experienced as children.

Don't get me wrong. My childhood was not horrible. It was, however, far from perfect. It was as messy as I imagine many of your childhoods were. I am reminded of something Fred Buechner once said. He said it would be helpful if we all sat down and told how we survived our own lives. I am sure each of us would have amazing stories to tell. We have all had to overcome some brokenness in our past as we attempt to live healthy and full lives in the present.

Life is messy. That is a given. What else can we glean from this sorry story? The next obvious observation is that sin has consequences. When we fail to deal with sin in our own lives, it leads to greater consequences as our lives unfold. That is what Nathan told David.

I am not all that comfortable seeing these consequences as God punishing us for our sins as the Old Testament affirms. But, even if we do not see these consequences as God's punishment, we can't help but admit there are some natural consequences to bad behavior, especially when that behavior is not dealt with in open and honest ways.

Part of the consequences after his sin with Bathsheba that follow David around the rest of his life stem from his horrible parenting. David was primarily an absent father. He loved his children, but that love was sloppy. He always seemed to take the easy way when it came to the hard part of being a parent. His understanding of love did not contain the sometimes hard role of providing consequences for his children when they behaved in horrible ways. He just could not bring himself to deal with his boys because, as he said, he loved them too much.

When he fails to act when Amnon rapes his half sister, Absalom takes it into his own hands and Amnon dies. When he fails to put Absalom into his place when he was getting too big for his own britches, it resulted in a civil war and Absalom's death.

We can see that when parents fail to discipline their children because they are not brave enough to provide tough love, they do their children no favors. While we would not want to adopt the disciplinary standards of David's day, this passage does provide for us the opportunity to examine our own parenting. Newport Church takes healthy parenting very seriously. We have offered parenting classes in the past, and I am sure we will offer them again. Let David remind the parents among us how important it is to risk tough love in our parenting.

Finally, we can see when greed and lust get out of hand, sometimes we are left with no good choices. Joab's decision to kill Absalom is very troubling to read. It was a morally

ambiguous act at best. But, his killing David's son saved many lives in the long run and preserved the peace for his country.

We have seen this time and time again in war. The decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan was a very difficult decision and one that remains controversial. Those who defend it say many lives were saved because we did not have to invade Japan. Others have felt we crossed a terrible line when we used nuclear weapons killing many innocent citizens and causing ecological consequences for years after. War is like that. It causes us to choose between two bad options.

When sin leads to war, life really gets messy. This story ought to make any country think twice before going to war. Be very careful. You will be forced to choose between two very troubling options if you do not find other ways to deal with conflict.

Those are some observations that come to mind in reading this story. They do not offer much good news. In fact, the end of this passage can bring us to tears. Second Samuel 14 ends with one of the most poignant scenes in all of the Old Testament. We hear David's cry of despair, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

We are going to have to turn elsewhere to find that good news. Fortunately the lectionary gives us Psalm 130 to read this Sunday. That Psalm begins with a cry of despair which could have come out of the mouth of David. Certainly any of us who have gone through hard times can relate to the beginning of this Psalm.

But then it moves quickly into some powerful affirmations. The Psalmist says he/she will wait for the Lord. It is in God's word where we find hope. In that word we read that God's forgiveness is larger than our sin. God's ability to redeem is more powerful than our ability to cause messes.

That word of hope and good news comes from the Hebrew scriptures. It is a word that is amplified in the life of Jesus. We can trust that life is never so messy that God's steadfast love can't make a difference. Sin is never so great that God can't forgive. Grief need not have the final word in our lives. Messes, grief, and even death are followed by hope, resurrection hope.

When we can trust those affirmations we begin to see that life is more than a shabby soap opera. We are all on a faith journey. It can be messy, to be sure. But, it is also a journey filled with meaning and hope. Let it be so. Amen