

*Flesh & Blood*

Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

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Text: 2 Samuel 18

Hope Church has many folks who are very accomplished in the theater – and I am not one of them! My acting career peaked in 6<sup>th</sup> grade with a starring role in “My Fair Lady”, but sadly even after what I thought was a stirring rendition of “I’ve grown accustomed to her face” - no agents came a-calling after the final curtain fell. But then about a decade later, I did have another theater opportunity in college, as part of a January interim class – yes, at Calvin College! – and it was a great experience. And part of the role I played was to be King David - it was a play by Christopher Fry called “Sleep of Prisoners” – a wonderful play, but a bit hard to explain. The basic idea is there are some soldiers held prisoner in a church - and the various characters have dreams - and in one of the dreams I was King David. And the story played out in the dream was the story of the death of David’s son, my son, Absalom: “Absalom – O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would that I had died instead of you – O Absalom, my son, my son!” I can still feel the pain and passion I touched on in saying those words: David, grieving the death of his child – it was intense. I wasn’t a parent then – but I still connected to those feelings in David; I am a parent now and connect to the feelings in different ways; but this isn’t a passage or sermon only for parents – we all have people we love and are loved by, and these are feelings we all understand in some way.

David is a fascinating character – as his story is told you love him and you hate him; he is the hero and the goat, the good king and the tyrant. Yet in the midst of royal intrigue and grabs for power, of wars and civil war – there is a moment in which none of those things matter – there is just this: ‘Absalom – oh my son – Absalom!’ – the love of a parent for a child. Perhaps that touches on especially tender places for you – knowing those feelings all too well. But for all of

us, I want to hold that scene in the background for just a bit, and shift to looking at the Ephesians passage.

In Ephesians, after quite a list of guides for faithful living, the passage concludes: “Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children” – **children of God** – that is the image, the reality, of the relationship that is expressed here – speaking of that community of believers as God’s children – beloved children; and as we read that, we think of ourselves as children of God too. That’s an image we often use as Christians; but I wonder if it’s so familiar to us – children of God – that we might just cruise past it. So I want to pause and take a moment to consider what it means; and to consider first not what it means about us, but about God.

What does it mean about God, that we are called children of God? Does it mean that God feels about our lives as a parent does? – that God feels about your life with the passion of a Mother, of a Father? Hold that image of God about your life – hold with it the image of the passion of David – hold that as there is pain and loss in your life, that the heart of God breaks, like David calling out for Absalom: ‘my child, my child– my daughter, my son – would that I had suffered instead of you – my child.’ Is that an image you hold of God? It is a passionate and personal and intimate image. Is it even possible for God to be so for each of us? – it boggles the imagination; and yet it is what the image, “beloved children” draws us to – what it claims about God and about us.

I want to return to David – and critique David. That may seem a harsh tack to take as we see a parent grieving a child – but part of what has unsettled me in this story is to think about: who is it that David cries for? David cries for those close to him – for his son, Absalom, even though Absalom had betrayed him. In the story last week David cries to God for Bathsheba’s child, a life taken by sickness. In other stories you’ll hear David cry for the love he had for Jonathan who is killed. David laments for those near to him, but...does David have the capacity to cry for anyone else? – for others who suffer? for those he has brought suffering to? In some sense,

I am being hard on David, as it is understandable to grieve those closest to us; but is there also some capacity, some greater sense of compassion and empathy, that can move one beyond that close circle of care?

I want to return to the image of children of God – and critique us, critique the church. When I played out that image of God feeling the pain of our lives as a parent – of us as children of God – it is a powerful image; but it is one that the church has too often used as something exclusive to us – messages sometimes subtle and sometimes much more blatant that WE are children of God, and others not – or others not fully so as we are as Christians. And truth is, there are different threads in Scripture, some that use that “children” language more exclusively and some points at which the image is broadened to all.

But it is my deep conviction that we are at a point in history – in church and society, politically and globally – when the Spirit of God is urgently calling us to pick up that thread which connects us to all as children of God; that thread in which our identity as children of God is not one that distinguishes us from and elevates us over others, but that is a revelation to us of who we are that opens us to see those around us in the same way. It is in that point of connection to others that the Spirit of God will speak to us a different story for our faith than the narratives of this day that divide and demean, that elevate and exclude. It is in such faith that nurtures in us a capacity for compassion beyond our closest circles of care – that nurtures a heart that reflects the heart of God for all God’s children.

This week a friend pointed me in the direction of a really cool video by author Jeremy Rifkin about “empathic civilization” – with the core idea that in recent decades, social science researchers have been surprised to conclude that human beings are innately empathetic; Rifkin uses the clever terminology that human beings are “soft wired” for empathy. And this is a surprise because researchers, like many of us, have been influenced by longstanding ideas that human beings are by nature a cutthroat bunch. And in fact, Rifkin and this research isn’t

downplaying at all the ways in which human community is often and awfully warped towards self-interest and harm rather than empathy and thriving. But there is something remarkable still in the conclusion that an appeal to empathy which connects not just closely but to strangers and much broader circles too, is not something that goes against human nature but is an appeal that connects to the heart of who we are.

What does it mean to be a child of God? – is it to be made in the image of God? – created by God with a heart that has compassion for others? – with a heart that reflects our God; a heart that cares, that weeps, not just for some, but that has a capacity to believe that all are embraced by a God whose heart breaks at suffering, by a God who enters into life to bring wholeness. Is that what it means to be a child of God? – telling us the truth of who God is and who we are.

As we are nourished at this table by the One who says: “I am the Bread of Life” – we are brought together in such a truth, such a story, about our lives and world. Jesus Christ is one cared deeply for those close to him; and he was the one who always expanded those circles of connection and compassion to include others, include the unlikely, include all. The Bread of Life which is Jesus nourishes us to resist the false narratives of suspicion and scarcity; feeds us with the truth of being a beloved child of God; strengthens us into the image of God which shapes our hearts to claim the same truth for others – the Bread of Life who sends us from the table to be witnesses to embody that story in God’s world. Thanks be to God. AMEN.