

**“Good News from a Messy Story”**  
**2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33**  
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**August 12, 2018**

A number of times over the years when I have been asked to help with some complex family issue, someone has noted that I must have had a good bit of clinical training or experience with similar issues. My response has always been to say that I have some training and a good bit of experience, thirty-six years now, but the truth is I have been exposed to just about every possible messy issue in my own family of origin.

I had a bipolar aunt who held a butcher’s knife at my throat one Thanksgiving because her oldest son and I were planning to have her committed. We appreciated her willingness to confirm our diagnosis. I have a family member who attempted to take her own life at age eighteen. Only limited anatomical knowledge allowed her to live and thankfully she is doing well now. And I have another family member who has been in and out of treatment and prison for almost thirty years.

So, while I have learned about mental health issues and family dysfunctions through various forms of education, training and professional experience, I have also learned a great deal from my own family, and this is not to mention issues found in Dana’s family. Yet all of us have issues in our families. The term “dysfunctional family” may not be redundant. There is a difference between being imperfect, which all families are, and being dysfunctional, but all families have issues.

This includes biblical families. In fact, biblical families are some of the most dysfunctional of all! We have been following one of these all summer, King David’s family. If you have been here much, you may be wondering when we are going to get off this runaway train to nowhere and get back to some nice Gospel lessons or at least an epistle or two. And the answer is – after today. We will continue the Hebrew Bible readings which move on to Solomon, but we’ll move to the Christian Testament for sermon material. But as we consider one last story about David, we have to note just how messed up his family is.

The last two weeks we read stories about David's forced relationship with Bathsheba; the subsequent death of her husband Uriah, murder for hire really; and the prophet Nathan's confrontation of David which ends in a series of punishments, one of which is the death of the child Bathsheba is carrying. This is messy enough, but we may get the impression that once David acknowledges his sin and accepts his punishment, everything moves on more smoothly at home for the king until today when he learns that his son Absalom is killed in battle and thus feels profound grief, the grief a parent feels at the loss of a child.

And to be clear, David does feel grief. There is no loss more painful than that of a child, no matter how long a child has lived. The psychological stress charts list the loss of a spouse as more difficult, but that doesn't square with my experience. It's not a competition, both losses are profound, but as my great-grandmother said after my grandfather in Lincolnton died of cancer, "You just don't expect to outlive your children." David feels profound grief, but it is not just straightforward sadness, death is rarely uncomplicated, and in this case, it is because family matters have not gone smoothly the past few years.

The details are found in 2 Samuel 13-18. One of David's sons, Amnon, rapes Absalom's sister Tamar, his step-sister, and Absalom is furious. David too is angry, but he refuses to punish Amnon because he loves him. The once courageous leader has become an overindulgent father. So, since the king is too weak to pursue justice, Absalom decides to take matters into his own hands. He has Amnon killed, but then David is furious with him and Absalom has to run away and hide.

All of this is bad enough, but as the story continues, the conflict grows. There is a faux forgiveness experience. We've been there. Father and son are together and father verbally forgives son. But father doesn't acknowledge wrongdoing, son isn't repentant and each party blames the other. So, there is no real forgiveness, no genuine healing.

Absalom thinks he would make a better king than David and people love him, especially when he plays up his advantages over his father. He might become king without conflict but, like young Simba in Disney's *The Lion King*, he "can't wait to be king!" So, he takes control by force, David is forced into exile and this is where we join the story.

The lectionary edits out some of the brutality, but David gathers troops to fight back. He is outnumbered, but wiser than his son who chooses to fight in a heavily wooded area. Interestingly the text says the forest claims more victims than the sword. Perhaps Lewis and Tolkien found inspiration for Narnia and The Rings here, the trees join the battle!

Anyway, our translation says that 20,000 men die in this battle but the Hebrew term translated as “thousand,” *elef*, also meant “military contingent” at this time. Perhaps only 20 groups of a dozen or so are killed. Still, it is a brutal battle which David’s troops ultimately win.

Yet, as wise as David is, his commanders are wiser; they keep him away from the battlefield, ostensibly to protect him, but also to prevent him from being overindulgent of yet another troubled child. If Absalom is cornered, will David have the will to do what needs to be done?

Well, Absalom is cornered. His head is caught by a tree. The text doesn’t say his hair is involved, but it has been noted that he has long, beautiful hair everyone admires. Could it have led to his undoing, a symbol of pride going before the fall? The story is loaded with symbolism. Absalom rides a mule, a symbol of kingly rule, but as he is caught by the tree and hangs between heaven and earth, the mule rides off... his time on the throne has passed. And then, Absalom is killed. Joab, the commander, wisely involves 10 men in the deed so that no one person can be held accountable, and the deed is done.

As the story ends, David is interested in news of the battle. Two messengers go, there is protection in numbers. “All is well,” he is told, we have won. Great, says David, with a measure of reserve, “Is it well with the young man Absalom?” The tension mounts. The dialogue is carefully scripted. The messenger says, “May the enemies of my lord, the king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man.”

The message is subtle but effective and we learn how wise David’s commanders were. Despite everything Absalom has done, David is consumed with grief. “O my son, Absalom,” he says repeatedly. He cries out in exasperation like any parent who has lost a child. He feels grief, but not just for this son, for the mess he has made of his family.

I think of the scene in “The Fugitive” where Deputy Marshall Samuel Gerard views the scene of a crash where a bus carrying prison

inmates has run into a train. Metal is strewn everywhere, and the inmates, including falsely accused Dr. Richard Kimble, have escaped, and Gerard says, “My, my, my, my. What a mess.” That’s David’s family, it’s a mess, and he is a good guy, indeed, God’s chosen king!

So, what are we to make of all this messiness? I’m not sure it says anything about political leaders in general. The message is not that political leaders have to be horrible family people in order to succeed nor even that private morality doesn’t matter. I say this because many people have tried to make that argument over the years.

When Grover Cleveland was elected president in 1884, his opponent accused him of fathering a child out of wedlock. There was even a biting bit of humor created wherein a child was envisioned as saying, “Ma, ma, where’s my Pa? Gone to the White House, ha, ha ha.” Cleveland didn’t argue with the claim, but responded by saying that his opponent was eminently qualified for family life. So, voters should return him to his family, while Cleveland should be returned to public life for which he was eminently qualified. In other words, good political leaders have to be lousy family people. This is not the biblical message.

The message is that all families have issues and this is actually good news. It is liberating, normalizing. It doesn’t mean we should try to outdo each other in dysfunction. It means that we are not the only family with issues and thus, there is no need to feel the kind of guilt and shame that cripples. Where there are issues, we should work on them, diligently, prayerfully, with professional help, but we need not feel like we are wearing some scarlet letter because we are human and flawed.

The truth is even normal family life can be messy. Think about what it is like to send our children off to school the first time, to negotiate the joys and challenges of adolescence, to manage the mixed emotions of children growing into adults and living on their own, to regain one’s focus on marriage as the nest empties, to deal with multiple life changes, to help aging parents make decisions, to function as parents for our parents when we must. All of these realities are messy.

I may have shared the following reflection with some of you before. It comes from an old textbook on the family.

One night my teen-aged stepdaughter tearfully accused her father of being interested in her only if she was accepted into a good college so he could enjoy a little reflected status. My God, I thought, she's talking about the man who burped her, carried her to the zoo, played endless games of Monopoly and Clue, and stood in 100-degree heat to watch her ride dumb beasts in meaningless circles around a dusty ring. She's talking about the man who carried 10 bottles of ketchup all through Europe because she wouldn't eat anything without it. How did she miss the tenderness, despair, passion, pride and fear he feels for her. Of course, I knew the facts. She has to grow away, to tear apart the first love and start again – but how painful the ripping of sinews, how wretched we all become in the process. (Anne Richardson Roiphe in *Scenes from Life - Views of Family, Marriage and Intimacy*, pp. 253-254).

It is a story that sounds all too familiar. Of course, most of us have been on both sides of this story. We were all teenagers once and our parents let us live! But adolescence is just messy, life is messy, families are messy, sometimes in the process of normal realities, and sometimes in the context of more substantive issues. But even when we are talking about the latter, the messiness provides a means for us to grow.

In his book *Care of the Soul* (p. 25) Thomas Moore says the soul prospers in the context of family because the soul feeds on the details of life, its variety, quirks and idiosyncrasies, and the family is full of these things. In families we live close to people we might not otherwise want to talk to. Over time we get to know them intimately. We learn their most miniscule, most private habits and characteristics. Family life is full of major and minor crises – the ups and downs of health, success and failure in career, marriage and divorce, and all kinds of characters. It's difficult to imagine anything more nourishing to the soul. Indeed.

Family life provides wonderful space for growth because messy circumstances challenge us to grow and because messiness allows room for grace. In their book *Flawed Families of the Bible* David and Diana Garland argue that biblical stories about families are raw and uncensored (pp. 13-14). They offer bitter reminders of how awful family life can

become. And yet, “It is in those broken places that we catch glimpses of God’s grace and healing, of God silently reaching in to touch the wound, and often, of fragile and broken people stepping up to do what is right.”

The Garlands reference a story Richard Rohr tells about Navaho rug weaving where every rug is beautifully crafted, but each has an obvious flaw near a corner. When a rug maker is asked why, the reply is, “This is where the spirit moves in and out.” In the flaws, this is where the spirit moves, in Navaho rugs and in our lives. Thus, the messiness of how we relate to each other allows room for grace.

I think of a family in another setting who had four generations of people living in a tiny four-room house. There were too many of them for that space and they ranged from a great-grandmother all the way to an infant great-grandchild. The father of that child was dying of cancer, which is why I visited often, but his biggest concern was not for himself, but for several family members with addictions that he would not be able to influence after he was gone.

It was an emotional experience just to walk into that house. There was so much need, so much woundedness, so much pain. And yet, that dying father was a beacon of light and a means through which grace could work. His courageous concern for others pushed them in the direction of healing. God didn’t give him cancer to heal his loved ones. Nor did God make that family poor so that they would be stuck together. But God used those realities to reach in silently and touch many wounds.

The Bible offers us other kinds of help as we seek to relate to each other in loving ways. The passage from Ephesians contains wonderful advice about resolving differences quickly, speaking the truth, using words to impart grace, putting away bitterness and being kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other as God in Christ has forgiven us. The reading from John tells us that Jesus is the bread of life who nurtures us in every way; thus, being intimately connected to him enables his love to flow through us. But it helps just to know that having some messiness in our family does not make us strange or out of reach for God. God somehow, amazingly works through David and his family despite all the messiness. Surely God can work through us.