

“A Word of Grace and a Word of Guidance”
2 Samuel 18:5–9, 15, 31–33; Ephesians 4:25—5:2
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It is always interesting to notice how liturgical practices are experienced as opposed to how they are designed. Something as simple as a response to scripture can be experienced in very different ways. On paper, the words are straightforward. “This is the Word of the Lord,” a reader says, and the people reply, “Thanks be to God.” But sometimes we say, “Thanks be to God!” while other times, like after today’s reading from 2 Samuel, we say, “Thanks be to God?” Like... really?

There are texts that just don’t seem like the Word of God. Many, though not all, are in the Hebrew canon. In these texts, there just seems to be so much hostility and violence, so little compassion and hope, that we wonder what good these stories can do. They come from a time long ago and are connected to a world that seems completely alien to us. According to 2 Samuel 3:2-5, David has sons from six different wives, and this does not include Michal or Bathsheba! We know marriages help form political alliances in this time, but it seems so strange to us, and there is so much conflict and so little that seems to apply to us.

And yet, there may be something here that speaks to us, something familiar, something helpful. The reading from 2 Samuel 18 presents a troubling tale about a dysfunctional family and the painful consequences of unresolved conflict. It is a raw and uncensored account, like many in scripture. Those who want to shield their children from the world will have to limit access to the Bible. Amnon rapes his half sister, Tamar. Absalom, who is Tamar’s brother, has Amnon killed but then has to flee their father David’s wrath. Absalom rallies a rival army but is killed in today’s reading, even though David instructs his soldiers to deal gently with Absalom, and David grieves bitterly. “Oh my son, Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you!” We want to say, “What did you expect? You started this with all of your wives and children and your own transgressions?!” But it is still tragic.

So, what exactly is helpful here? Well, the details are jolting, but the themes are familiar. Rape, murder, polygamy and incest *may* not be part of our story... but our families are full of all sorts of messy realities. Fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, brothers and sisters who don't talk to each other for years — this is not just an ancient theme. Family members harming each other, the wounded seeking revenge, no one experiencing reconciliation — this sounds all too familiar to many of us.

I had an aunt hold a butcher's knife to my throat because she found out that her oldest son and I were planning to have her committed. She did at least confirm our perception that she needed help. Dana had an uncle raise his hand to hit her when he saw her Russian history books. He decided she must be a communist, even though her interest is in pre-revolution Russian history. She is a Czarist, not a communist!

But all kidding aside — and I kid not because any of this is funny but because we cannot cry all the time — our families have struggles just like biblical families. So, the good news here is twofold — in scripture we see that we are not that different from the people who have come before us, they have struggles just like ours; and we see that God's grace is at work even among such deeply flawed people and families.

In their book *Flawed Families of the Bible*, David and Diana Garland argue that biblical stories 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 (p.14)." 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.

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, but his biggest concern was not for himself, but for several family members with addictions he would not be able to help 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.

God's grace is at work in and through deeply flawed people and families. If God can work through David, God can work through us.

And yet, this is not the only word scripture has for the challenges of family life and other significant relationships. In the reading from Ephesians, we find guidance for a better way.

It begins with doing everything we can to build healthy relationships. The author talks about putting away falsehood and speaking the truth. Honesty is critical for any healthy relationship, even our relationship with God, but it is a rare commodity. The author also speaks about using words not to do evil but to build up others. What would be left of social media if everyone were to follow this counsel? But all communication has the potential to tear down or build up. The author charges us to speak in a way that gives grace to those who hear. Then, he counsels us to be tenderhearted and to love as Christ loved us.

This all seems pretty obvious. We all know how important honesty is, how much difference a kind word can make, how much love matters. But the key lies in doing, not simply knowing.

The good news is the author of Ephesians is a realist. He knows that no matter how hard we try, we will sometimes fall short, we will sometimes have disagreements, and thus the key to sustaining healthy relationships lies in how we handle them. He has two suggestions. First, we should resolve our disagreements quickly so that anger does not grow. "Do not let the sun go down on your anger," he says, or as many couples have been told, "Never go to bed angry."

There is an old story about a clinician speaking to a crowd about the importance of getting in touch with our shadow side. During a break, a nicely dressed woman came up to him and said with a smile, "I

find this all very interesting, but the truth is that I do not have any dark feelings." Before he could respond, a man walked up to the woman and said, "Honey, I'm going home," and the woman quit smiling.

"Do you know who that was?" she asked. He said, "Your husband, I assume." "Do you know where he is going?" she asked. "I assume home," said the speaker. "Do you know what he's going to do? He's going to sit in that stupid chair in front of that stupid television and drink that stupid can of beer while he watches that stupid ballgame!"

"Really?" said the clinician. "He sits in that stupid chair and watches that stupid ballgame when I have a meal ready and he says, 'Just one more play, honey, just one more play.' It makes me so mad! Do you know what I'm going to do?! One day I'm going to walk into that room and take that can of beer out of his hand and pour it over his head and smash..." At this point she stopped because she realized that the room was quiet. Everyone was listening to her, the woman who didn't have any dark feelings.

We all have emotions that cannot be denied. We may bury them for a while, but one day they will come out, and the longer we try to bury them, and the more feelings we add, the more difficult they will be to manage. "Do not let the sun go down on your anger," the author says.

But healing requires more than a willingness to acknowledge our feelings, it requires that we do something with them, that we practice forgiveness, which is the second thing the author suggests. We are to forgive one another, as God in Christ has forgiven us. All relationships involve woundedness. When we are hurt, we can pretend we are not; we can end the relationship; or we can choose the only remaining path, the one modelled by Christ, the path of forgiveness.

Some things are difficult to forgive. I don't know how Absalom could forgive his brother Amnon. But we are not expected to do this on our own. Before our reading today, the author of Ephesians prays that his readers will be strengthened through their inner being through the Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in their hearts through faith. The Spirit empowers them and us to pursue, however imperfectly, a better way that involves love and forgiveness. That sounds like a message to which we can say, "Thanks be to God!"