

November 5, 2022

All Saints Day

2 Samuel 18:33-19:8

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“The truth is more important than the facts.” Architect Frank Lloyd Wright is credited with this bit of wisdom. I don’t know specifically to what he was referring if he did say this, but it certainly reflects what I’ve been taught about our sacred texts. The Bible is full of truth, but it’s often sketchy when it comes to facts. In other words, the Bible is not a history book or a science book, it is a collection of literature that holds the possibility of teaching us something about how our faith ancestors understood God and their relationship with God. Some of what was true for our ancestors is not true for us today. But a lot of it is.

Sometimes biblical truth comes in the form of a story that shows us what not to do. That’s the case with the story we will read today. The background of the story is a lot, so I am going to summarize it. I hope my summary encourages you to read it for yourself. Amnon and Absalom were two of King David’s sons, though they had different mothers. Absalom and his sister, Tamar, shared the same mother. Tamar’s story is gut-wrenching and may be triggering for some. Amnon, Tamar’s half-brother premeditatedly raped her. Because of that, there was a terrible feud started between Absalom and Amnon. It would only end when one of them was dead. It is appropriate to wonder why David did nothing when he found out what his son, Amnon, had done. Maybe, since David had raped Bathsheba, he thought it would be hypocritical to impose consequences on his son for the same thing. You’d think he would have some protective instinct toward his own daughter though. But I digress...

Two years later, at a family dinner, Absalom waited for Amnon to get drunk and then had his servants kill him. This negatively affected Absalom’s relationship with his father. It was years before David allowed his son to come home and be in his presence. Eventually he did, but unbeknownst to David, Absalom really didn’t have any interest in a real relationship with him. His real interest was in being the king. In the end, Absalom basically staged a coup d’état against his father’s regime. David’s side prevailed, but in the fight, Absalom was killed. Our story picks up right after David learned his son was dead. This is 2 Samuel 18:33-19:8.

³³The 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!”

19 It was told Joab, “The king is weeping and mourning for Absalom.” ²So the victory that day was turned into mourning for all the troops, for the troops heard that day, “The king is grieving for his son.” ³The troops stole into the city that day as soldiers steal in who are ashamed when they flee in battle. ⁴The king covered his face, and the king cried with a loud voice, “O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son!” ⁵Then Joab came into the house to the king and said, “Today you have covered with shame the faces of all your officers who have saved your life today, and the lives of your sons and your daughters, and the lives of your wives and your concubines, ⁶for love of those who hate you and for hatred of those who love you. You have made it clear today that commanders and officers are nothing to you, for I perceive that, if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased. ⁷So go out at once and speak kindly to your servants, for I swear by the Lord, if you do not go, not a man will stay with you this night, and this will be worse for you than any disaster that has come upon you from your youth until now.” ⁸Then the king got up and took his seat in the gate. The troops were all told, “See, the king is sitting in the gate,” and all the troops came before the king.

This story is about David’s grief over the death of his son. The depth of his grief may seem surprising based on the very complicated relationship he had with Absalom. Absalom killed Amnon, his first born. They had spent time estranged. Absalom lied to him, and the lie enabled Absalom to make a run for the throne. Theirs was not an easy relationship. And yet, when David learned Absalom was dead, he was gutted. I am not an expert, but if I had to guess, David’s sadness was mixed with guilt and anger and shame. All of it was a lot to bear. The death of someone we love has a way of causing all of the emotions we’ve stuffed inside ourselves for a long time to come to the surface.

I wonder if David’s feelings after his son’s death surprised even him. I don’t think David was the only one caught off guard. Joab, David’s nephew, and the commander of his army, along with the soldiers he commanded, were shocked that the result of their victory on behalf of the king was not celebration, but mourning. And Joab was not having it. He was much less concerned about David the father’s grief than he was about David the king keeping up appearances. I’m

sure he was in a tough spot, his soldiers had just won a major battle and yet they were demoralized because their king seemed only to care about the death of his son, who happened to be the enemy. Joab told David that wasn't a good way to inspire soldiers to continue to go to battle for him. Morale was low.

But for David, compared to the devastating reality of his son's death, everything else was white noise in the background; one thing blended into the next, like shades of beige. I can imagine that in those moments he felt like both a bad father and a bad king. Sometimes for Christians the feelings associated with grief are not only scary because they are so big and unrelenting, but because we have gotten the mistaken idea that if we stay sad or mad, we must not be very good Christians. We've gotten the message that, if our faith was strong, we would snap out of our grief and be happy. That's what Joab wanted David to do in the story. Just snap out of it. And in the story David was shamed into going through the motions.

But anyone who has experienced grief knows grief will not be ignored. Most of us would rank grief in the top one or two things we would rather not experience. The inner, invisible pain of grief can be overwhelming. And yet, in his book *Birdlike and Barnless*, author and minister Jim Burklo writes that grief is sacred. "It is devastating and dreadful, yet it is a holy thing," he says. "Terrible as it is, it is a gift."¹ What he is getting at, I think, is the grief that comes from losing someone we love reminds us that we are alive and that we have loved deeply. It jolts us out of apathy. Therapist Joanna Macy says that apathy is usually defined as disinterest, but it is worse. It is the inability or unwillingness to feel our own pain or to feel the pain of others. It is a numbness in our soul. Macy goes on to say that apathy might possibly be the worst problem wealthy societies, like ours, faces.² Grief pulls us from the apathy we use, without even realizing it, to protect ourselves from getting hurt.

That doesn't mean grief isn't painful. It is. It feels raw and dark and lonely and hopeless at times. But, in grief, we feel deeply. And we give the people around us the opportunity to step into our suffering, "...our grief invites others to snap out of their apathy, their numbness, and feel with us."³ All Saints Day is such an

¹ Burklo, Jim, *Birdlike and Barnless*, St. Johann Press: Haworth, NJ, 2008, 193.

² Burklo, 193.

³ Burklo, 193.

invitation for us. It is our opportunity to show up for each other and to be reminded that we are not alone. What we offer each other is the gift of community.

And really, the church should be a place that makes room for grief every day. Burklo says it like this, “In a way, the Christian religion is based on grief. A much-loved man named Jesus died, long before his time, and those who loved him were beside themselves with sadness. It took a long time for them to grieve. It didn’t happen on a schedule, either. According to the gospel myth, they drifted in depression and confusion until the day we call Pentecost, fifty days after Easter, when they gathered together and discovered a whole new way to be community. The Christian church grew out of a fully-observed, fully honored grief.”⁴ And I believe it is important for us to carry on that tradition.

We must resist being like Joab, telling the people in our lives, maybe even ourselves, that it is time to be happy again, time to snap out of it. We must be willing to let ourselves and each other grieve for as long as grief takes. Today, we create space for and honor each other’s grief for whatever or whoever we have lost. And we remember that more than one thing can be true at the same time. We can be sad for what and who we have lost and joyful as we tell their stories and remember what we had. Human beings are complicated. In fact, David’s story is a perfect example of that. If we were to read his whole story, there would be moments when we would admire him and moments when we would be appalled by him. And all throughout that story, we would read about a God who never gave up on him. You see, God isn’t nearly as complicated as we humans are. God is present and God is love. No matter what. In joy and sorrow, through the good, the bad, and the ugly, God has never and will never leave us alone. Amen.

⁴ Burklo, 194.