

First Presbyterian Church
2 Sam. 15:1-12, “Roots and the Family of David”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 11/15/2020

This month we’ve been talking about our roots.

What is the deep history of our relationships, families,
and congregational past that sustains us
through times of change?

What are the historical best practices we draw upon?

And what are the bitter roots that trip us up when they
emerge above the surface from time to time?

Good, bad, or indifferent, there’s a lot in the way we relate to each other
that impacts how we move forward –
especially when times are challenging.

David is a hero of the Bible who we pointed to as a tremendous
source of strength for Jesus who was called “the son of David”
when the angel announced to Mary that she would be pregnant
with the Lord’s anointed.

But David’s own experience of his family was very much a mixed bag.
Every family is –nobody gets a perfectly clean slate.

In fact, this is a story filled with tragedy, revenge,
dysfunctional family relationships, suffering, and rebellion.
These years force David to face
the most difficult challenges of his life.

In the midst of these challenges, he must decide whether
he will practice leadership as God’s chosen king,
or remain on autopilot, letting the chips fall where they may.

This story begins in 2 Sam. 13, before the passage we read today.

There we learn about David’s beautiful daughter, Tamar.

Tamar was desired by her calculating half-brother Amnon:
David’s first-born son, and heir to his throne.

Horrifically, Amnon conspires with a friend and they devise a way
for Amnon to get what he wants. To put it bluntly, he rapes her.

When this horrific deed took place how do you think David would respond?
Surely Amnon would be punished – not only punished, but perhaps
killed or at least banished from the kingdom.

We read that David was “furious,” when he learned of it,
but ... there was no action taken on his part.
What kind of a father doesn’t even respond when
sexual abuse takes place in his own family?
The answer is a father like David who had forgotten
his own roots – the calling and anointing of the Lord
which had given him such courage early in life.

That’s gone now, he’s become a wealthy king
who sits on his throne and eats fancy food
and is distant from the people – even his own children.

Sadly, David’s inaction regarding Tamar is the root
that creates all the treachery we read about in chapter 15.

Absalom, at first, kept a quiet rage within him.
Two years later Absalom orchestrated Amnon’s murder
to avenge his sister Tamar’s honor.

Subsequently, Absalom leaves the palace.
For murder, even when justified as revenge, is still murder,
and he fear’s the wrath of his father, David.
He lived in the wilderness for three years.

When Absalom finally tries to come home,
he is granted clemency by David – but from a distance.
This distance is demonstrated in the story by only referring
to David as, “the king,” never using his proper name.

Joab, David's advisor, knows that David's heart
was heavy without Absalom.

He arranged for word to be sent out to Absalom to consider returning,
and then for David to be approached
with the idea from another person.

The king sniffs this reconciliation plow out,
but grants permission for him to come back anyway, saying,
"Very well, I will do it. Go, bring back the young man Absalom."

Then we read in 14:23,
"Joab went and brought Absalom back to Jerusalem.
But the king said, "He must go to his own house;
he must not see my face."
So Absalom went to his own house
and did not see the face of the king."

What was that all about? "He must not see my face?"
He will grant forgiveness only at arm's length.

Absalom can return, but there will be no grand reunion of father and son.
It took two years for Absalom to be granted a presence before David.

David, the recipient of lavish grace cannot extend grace to his own son.
Crimes of passion and lust have terrible consequences,
but neither of them caused David's downfall
when it came to Bathsheba and Uriah.

By contrast, the long term, calculated rejection of a family member
in need of grace was a sin that grew much deeper roots
in David's heart.

In time, Absalom's brooding, vengeful heart obtained a new target:
If the king would not welcome him back in the family,
then perhaps he need not be on the throne at all.

In 14:25-26 we read a description of Absalom:

“In all Israel there was not a man so highly praised for his handsome appearance as Absalom. From the top of his head to the sole of his foot there was no blemish in him. Whenever he cut the hair of his head—he used to cut his hair once a year because it became too heavy for him—he would weigh it, and its weight was two hundred shekels by the royal standard.”

His beauty and his anger at his father made him a magnet for all those with complaints against the king.

Our reading from chapter 15 reveals that Absalom worked the crowds for four long years, winning their favor,
planting seeds of doubt regarding David’s ability to lead.

When people would come with a grievance, Absalom would intercept them and use his famous charm. “Oh, I can’t believe this happened to you!
If only *I were appointed judge* in the land!
Then people could get the justice they deserve.”

And maybe Absalom was right – these last few years justice isn’t something that David appears to be very concerned with.

Finally the day came, and Absalom staged a coup in cooperation with one of David’s most trusted cabinet members.
That’s when David learns that the hearts of the people are with Absalom.

These are the same people who once sang,
“Saul has slain his thousands but David his tens of thousands.”
David has been personally rejected by the nation,
and now he is forced to flee.

And now David experiences the deep suffering of his son’s betrayal, his country’s rejection, and the knowledge that at least in part, it’s his own fault.

Where do we enter into this story?

Our families also have roots –
many of them proud and strong, others dismaying and unseemly.
Our congregation also has roots—
generations of people have worshipped here in this congregation
and in this very place.

Our roots offer us *both* encouragement and challenge.
To discern this encouragement and challenge we have to ask
how our past is influencing our attention
and our relationships today?

Do we remember our original calling,
our purpose for relationship and service together?
Do we still call upon the Lord in vital faith and hope?

Or do we simply go through the motions out of nostalgia and habit?
Are we content to relive the tales of old,
ignoring the present day injustices
that go on right under our feet?

The reality is that we can see both.
We have historical roots that provide us examples
of being a mission focused church that leans
on our history of caring for others.
We can also find patterns of behavior we would do well to watch out for.

The grace for us in David’s story is that even when our lives
veer off course, God is big enough to walk with us wherever we go.

None of us get the “perfect life” for following God.
We don’t get to choose our parents or grandparents.
We don’t get to choose the past events of our church.
We get the life we get, and it’s a tangle of influences and layers,
joy and grief, stagnation and growth.

In the midst of it all, there’s God. If we humble ourselves,
we can be blessed, and we can begin to recognize the roots
we draw upon when challenges come our way,
and invite God’s Spirit to steer our course
toward the heart of God.