

Sermon for Proper 8, June 30, 2024
St. Luke/San Lucas, Vancouver WA
2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 7-15; Mark 5:21-43

Creator God,
May your words be heard in our ears,
Understood in our minds,
Felt in our hearts,
And lived out in our acts.
Amen.

Our Old Testament lesson contains a lament, a song of remembrance for King Saul and his son Jonathan, written by David. It's one of the oldest pieces in the Bible, originally put down in what was known as the Book of Jashar, a piece of writing lost to history. It was also taught to the people of Israel as a poem, a song of remembrance, in honor of their first king.

Like most national works, it speaks of the great works of those who were lost. David refers to Saul and Jonathan as "Your glory, O Israel" as "The mighty" who have fallen. "Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely!"

The piece is filled with moving imagery and language, a true homage to the two men who died. Reading it, one would think it was written upon the death of a beloved ruler, by one of his loyal, loving subjects. Yet that is not quite the case.

Saul was a great warrior—and very tall and handsome. However, he was not a great king. He struggled. He struggled with what many think were tremendous migraines or a similar affliction that caused him to behave erratically. Some experts think that his physical ailments may have contributed to emotional instability—not a good thing in a ruler.

And David bore the brunt of much of Saul's wrath. On multiple occasions, Saul became violent toward David. As the people began to praise David for his feats of daring in battle

and to hold him up as a leader, Saul became jealous. He ordered David killed, causing David to flee, first into hiding and then into a life of exile.

Yet, at the moment of Saul's death, David did not celebrate. He did not glory in Saul's defeat. Saul and Jonathan's deaths, together with those of Saul's other sons, cleared the path for David to ascend to the throne. He could have used the moment to cheer. But instead, he wrote a moving tribute to Saul, a flawed, broken man, and to Saul's loyal son, Jonathan. How did this come about? How was David able to write so movingly, so caringly, about someone with whom he had had so much conflict?

It's important to remember that the relationship was not always so strained. As a young man, David was welcomed into Saul's household, slayer of the giant Goliath. David was a talented musician, frequently called upon to play and sing in order to sooth Saul during his more tortured moments. David was tutored, mentored, and became the closest of friends with Saul's eldest son and heir, Jonathan. He eventually married Saul's daughter, Mychal.

So yes, this is a story, not just of dynasty, but of family. Saul was not just David's king, he was also David's father-in-law. Jonathan was not just the heir apparent, presumptive future ruler of Israel, he was also David's brother-in-law, his closest friend, the brother of his heart.

What we see in this passage, in this lamentation, in this song, is a pouring out of the love that existed among these men. A love that existed even in the midst of their conflict. A love that continued even when Jonathan, torn between loyalty to his father and love for his very best friend, chose to remain at his father's side.

And so, when Saul and Jonathan were killed in battle, David did not celebrate. Instead, he mourned. He grieved. And he shared that grief with the entire nation and, through his writings, with generations to come.

Now, you may wonder why, when we have such rich texts in our epistle, in our gospel, texts on the economic justice, on Jesus' treatment of women, why am I talking about this rather obscure Old Testament passage? These other texts are great, and I commend them to you. There are a lot of thoughtful sermons on both of them and, if you go online and listen to other church services today, you are likely to hear some great preaching.

But I chose this particular text, this lament, because it speaks of family. Not just family by blood, but also family by choice. And the challenges that come with being family. Saul, Jonathan, David—they were family. They had deep bonds of love. They were also faced with challenges—physical and mental illness, jealousy, personality differences, divided loyalties, misunderstandings, poor communication, lots of poor communication. They had everything that real families have. This was not a Hallmark movie, it was real.

And many of us can relate. We also have complex family relationships. We also deal with challenges—physical, emotional, interpersonal. And we, like Saul and David, also have moments when we are not our best selves. When we are overcome with the pressures and worries, when we allow misunderstanding to grow, hurts to fester, when we lose sight of the love that binds us together.

The church is also a family, a family we choose to join. And, like all families, it comes with challenges. We do not all see things the same way. We do not all do things the same way. We don't all like the same type of music, or decorations, or food. We come here with various ailments—physical ailments, mental ailments, emotional ailments. Even when we try our best to be good, we are not perfect. We mess up. We are not always careful with our words. We forget appointments. We make mistakes. We hurt each other.

The question then becomes, what do we do when this happens? What do we do when we make a mistake, when we hurt another or when we are hurt by the actions of someone

else? In our current disposable culture, it's easy to walk away. To just stop trying. But that's not what we, as Christians, as the children of God, as family, that is not what we are called upon to do.

David had the opportunity on several occasions to kill Saul—and he did not do it, because he loved Saul. Even when Saul put out a death order on David, David still loved him.

Jonathan chose to stay with his father, rather than join with David. That had to have hurt. David wanted his friend, his mentor, his brother, at his side during that turbulent period, and Jonathan chose his father instead. Even then, David loved Jonathan. He may have been upset with Jonathan's choice, but he still loved him.

Like David, we are called upon to love each other, even through the hard times. We are called upon to love each other, even when we disagree—especially when we disagree. We are called upon to love each other when someone is struggling, when their illness causes them to behave in a way that is not typical for them, we are to love. When someone makes a mistake, when someone messes up, we are to extend grace and love. When someone irritates us, when they do something that just really gets on our very last nerve, we are to love. And when we are the one who makes the mistake, we need to extend that same grace to ourselves, to admit our faults, to ask forgiveness, and to continue in relationship.

We have the beautiful song that David wrote to honor Saul and Jonathan upon their deaths, a lamentation that pours out his love for these two special, flawed men. Let's not wait until someone is gone to sing of our love for them. Let's do our very best to live out our love for our families, for each other, now, each and every day. And, in those moments when we fall short, let's remember that we, like David, can call on God's love to sustain us.

Amen.