# Tears for Absalom, or, After God’s Own Heart

# 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

# A sermon preached at Page Auditorium on August 9, 2015 by the Rev. Spencer Bradford

David lived through a lot of different roles in his life, from court musician to national war hero and giant-slayer, to fugitive to gangster to mercenary for the Philistines, to tribal leader and eventually, national king. But over the course of that life, he did a lot of unsavory, even cruel things. From what we would call a protection racket in northern Israel, to the occasional war crime, to his criminal neglect toward the rape of his daughter Tamar by his son Abner, to his own infamous episode with Bath-sheba and the subsequent engineering of her husband Uriah’s death, to his often overlooked decision to pursue a standing army and militarize God’s people with a census of conscriptable men and taxable property – to the extreme displeasure of the God of Hosts – followed by his decision to invite plague from that same God upon his citizens in order to evade risk of personal harm. This brief survey of 1&2 Samuel constitutes much of David’s resume of achievements.

So among Mennonites, a historically pacifist communion, there’s a certain sympathy toward the denunciation of David by Shimei: “You bloody man!” and God’s own diversion of David from building his Temple because of the blood on his hands. What we have struggled with, however, is the word of Samuel to Saul that declared David’s succession to the throne, saying “the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart to be ruler over his people.” (1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22). What does it mean that David, this warrior most practiced at bloodshed who exhibited some of the worst faults in leadership and exemplified the worst depredations of the powerful, shared the heart of God, the holy sovereign of all creation and all the nations, the Lord of Peace?

I believe the grief of David for Absalom points us to an answer, though not in our typical reading of today’s story. Today’s reading brings to a close the longest narrated episode of David’s life in 2 Samuel: the armed coup d’etat by his son Absalom that drove David from Jerusalem as a political fugitive to regather his forces, and in a civil war reclaim his throne from Absalom. We typically hear in today’s reading David’s deeply passionate, parental love for his son Absalom, unabated even in face of Absalom’s own determination to overthrow and kill David. We may even trace the tragic roots of the workings of history by attributing Absalom’s rebellion against and hatred of David to David’s failure to address the rape of Absalom’s sister Tamar. The familial aspect lends this poignancy, but I think what we also see here is a particularly powerful instance of the quality of David’s character that did, in fact, express God’s own heart, that appears again and again, even in the life of this man of war: the quality of compassion for one’s enemies.

Interwoven with David’s ongoing violence as a warrior during his life, including this long narration of his temporary abdication during the rebellion of Absalom, is a theme of compassion for his enemies, especially those seeking his life. During his time as a fugitive from King Saul, we read of two instances when Saul was vulnerable and David could have killed him, but chose not to. In one of those instances, when Saul realizes what David did, he says: “You are more righteous than I, for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil. And you have declared this day how you have dealt well with me, in that you did not kill me when the Lord put me into your hands. For if a man finds his enemy, will he let him go away safe?”

After Saul died in battle against the Philistines, Saul’s chief of staff, Abner, set up one of Saul’s sons as king in opposition to David, delaying for some years David’s full rule over Israel. David negotiated a peace with Abner, but David’s chief of staff, Joab, had a blood-feud with Abner, and arranged to kill him after David’s truce, without David’s knowledge (Frank Underwood in House of Cards has nothing on Joab for subterfuge and lethal machinations, though from all Joab’s plotting one might suspect that the scriptwriters are studying 2 Samuel). And David arranged a state funeral for Abner, his enemy with whom he’d made peace, and lamented weeping at his burial, as we read today that he wept for his enemy and son, Absalom.

And when his son Absalom seizes David’s throne in Jerusalem, forcing him to flee, David learns that two members of Saul’s clan betray him to join with Absalom. Yet when he returns in victory to Jerusalem following today’s story (2 Sam. 19), he forgives these enemies who betrayed him, and they become part of his retinue (Mephibosheth and Shimei). David followed the instruction offered by the apostle in Ephesians a thousand years later, to “be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.” In this, as the apostle recognized, we are “imitators of God, as beloved children,” so surely it is in that respect, at those times, if not others, that David was “after God’s own heart.”

I am mindful that this week, on August 15, will be the 466th anniversary of the beginning of the evangelization of Japan by Portuguese Jesuit missionaries, led by St. Francis Xavier in 1549, landing in a harbor village on the far southwestern coast of Japan. During the following years and decades, two hundred thousand Japanese – from peasants to lords – found faith in hearing the gospel. But by 1587, as it became clear that Portuguese and Spanish commercial traders were exploiting Japan, Emperor Hideyoshi banished Europeans, including Jesuit missionaries, and he demanded Japanese Christians renounce their faith. Nevertheless, many maintained their faith in secret, and some Franciscan mission friars continued their ministry, even building a hospital and some churches. In late 1596, the Emperor began an active persecution of Christians to suppress the church, ordering 26 publicly identified Christians in the capital city Kyoto to be arrested and force-marched 500 miles to the coastal community where St. Francis Xavier had first landed, and be executed by crucifixion. A handful were non- Japanese mission workers, but 17 were Japanese. On February 5, 1597, they arrived and were tied to crosses, their necks fastened to the beams with iron rings. They began singing psalms, and one of them, a Japanese Franciscan named Paul Miki, began to sing the Sanctus – Holy, Holy, Holy Lord, God of power and might – as he would at the Eucharist, because he saw them offering their lives for the glory of God, as they did at the Lord’s Table, to be crushed like the wheat and grapes into the bread and drink of the altar.

As another simple litany of prayer to Jesus began among the martyrs, in the crowd that surrounded them, hundreds of Christians began to take it up aloud. And the official in charge of the execution began to fear that what the Emperor intended as a spectacle of terror to cow the Christians of Japan was becoming a display of their very devotion and courage. Then Paul Miki, still hanging from his cross, began to preach, declaring that he and his companions were not afraid to die, and only asked that those observing believe in their Lord. He declared his forgiveness of the Emperor and the officers carrying out the execution, his imitation of God from his heart, and sang from Psalm 31, “Lord, into your hands I commit my spirit.” With that, twenty-six samurai killed the martyrs with their spears.

That display of courage and forgiving compassion was the beginning of decades of persecution, torture and executions. But it was also the beginning of an underground church in Japan that would last for two and half centuries, until Japan re-opened relations with the West in the 1870s, and the U.S. pressured the government to stop the persecution in return for trade opportunities. It became evident that there were thousands of baptized Christians who emerged from hidden life around the area of the Urakami River near where St. Francis Xavier had first begun his work. By 1895, those Urakami Catholics, farmers and fishermen and laborers, began to build a stone and brick cathedral under the guidance of an amateur architect priest. Though money ran out several times, and the members had to do everything themselves, it was completed in 1917, St. Mary’s Cathedral, holding 5000 worshippers, the largest cathedral in east Asia, with two bell towers more than a hundred feet tall.

Of course, by that time, the Urakami community in which 12,000 baptized Christians lived, the largest concentration in all Japan, was part of a larger industrial and trade center. But still, the bell towers of St. Mary’s Cathedral were one of the two tallest landmarks in the city.

And though those towers are no more, we know that they stood tall, because they were visible from 31,000 feet in the air this morning, August 9, 1945, 70 years ago today, through a break in the clouds over that city where Francis Xavier landed, where 26 martyrs forgave their executioners, the city of Nagasaki. And when St. Mary’s bell towers were seen by the American B-29 crew, a plutonium bomb named Fat Boy was dropped and then detonated 500 meters over the cathedral, at 11:02 a.m., during morning mass. And 6000 of Nagasaki’s Christian civilians were instantly incinerated, boiled and carbonized in a radioactive fireball, along with another 26,000 civilian non-Christians. What three centuries of persecution by the Japanese Imperial government could not achieve, the U.S. military accomplished in 9 seconds. Three orders of Catholic nuns and a Christian girl’s school disappeared into black smoke and charred bones, and at least 70,000 more civilians would die in the following days, months and years as a direct result of the bombing at the Urakami River Cathedral of Nagasaki.

We know what our brothers and sisters went through Nagasaki because of the testimony of Christians like Takashi Nagai, a doctor who survived the initial blast, though the radiation gave him the leukemia that killed him a few years later. Though Takashi lost his wife, gathered her charred bones from the ruins of his home in the days after the bombing to bring to his children in the countryside, walking among victims whose eyes had been burned out, whose skin was falling off their bodies while they walked in search of water, he also practiced forgiveness toward those who killed his wife and friends, and forgiveness toward the Russian Soviets who imprisoned and tortured his brother. He sought to practice the compassion Jesus enjoined that inspired the apostle: “Be compassionate as your Father in heaven is compassionate. Love your enemies, and do good to them, and you will be children of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.”

Father George Zabelka was the Catholic chaplain for the U.S. Army Air Force unit that bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and after a career in the military chaplaincy, Fr. Zabelka

concluded that he had been in serious spiritual and moral error in legitimating the mass deaths of 70 years ago this past week. So on the 40th anniversary of the bombing, in 1985, he went back to Nagasaki and said that he now understood that the enemies of his nation were not, according to Jesus and his apostles, the enemies of God, but were rather fellow children of God who were loved by God and who therefore were not to be killed by God’s followers. He concluded by asking forgiveness from the hibakushas (the Japanese survivors of the atomic bombings), with tears of repentance. And several of them offered their own tears, and requests for forgiveness for the attack on Pearl Harbor. And David wept, O Absalom my son, would that I had died instead of you!

We are loved and forgiven by a God who, in Jesus, died instead of us, while we were his enemies crucifying him. This Son of David wept over Jerusalem that would crucify him, saying, “Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.” (Lk.19:41-42).

The compassion for enemies as Christ’s way of peace is hidden from our eyes still by the counsel of Joab. On hearing of David’s tears for his treacherous son whom Joab had defeated for David, Joab went to him to set him straight: “Today, you have shamed me and everyone else who saved your life and lives of your real family. You have shown us we are nothing to you, for now I know you would rather Absalom be alive and all of us dead. You love those who hate you and you hate those who love you. Now go out before your faithful supporters, or I swear to God I’ll take every one of them from you and you will regret this evil for the rest of your life.” And David dried his tears, went out, and held his court.

The counsel of Joab says that if we love our enemies, we must hate our friends, hate our families; that if we love Palestinians and Iranians, we must hate Israelis. The way some municipal officials put it, we must choose sides in the cycle of destruction, and if we see Freddie Gray’s neighbors with compassion, we must hate the police. Talk radio tells us if we love working people making a decent wage, we must resent and hate the rich. We are fed a steady diet of Joab’s real politik every day in the media and online. And we eat it, and we eat it, and it makes us sicker and sicker until we die in a wilderness of eyes for eyes, swords for swords, missiles for missiles, until Nagasaki burns again across our world. Joab died in that wilderness eventually, by the sword, for this is bread of death, and we are choking on it.

But Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.’” Jesus is God’s forgiveness embodied, and as we renew our reception of that compassion from God in the bread of his table, we also pledge that same compassion and forgiveness to our enemies, our strangers and threats, as a path to life. As Fr. Zabelka once said, “What the world needs is Christians who, in language that the simplest soul could understand, will proclaim: the follower of Christ cannot participate in mass slaughter. He or she must love as Christ loved, live as Christ lived and, if necessary, die as Christ died, loving ones enemies.” The bread of life is salted with tears of compassion for one’s enemies, and shared by children seeking God’s own heart, to live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Amen.