

Absalom! Absalom!

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Text: II Samuel 18: 19, and 24-33

St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church

There is so much I could say about my friend Brent. He was, until his retirement, a successful and innovative businessman and banker. He has remained an accomplished athlete, a person with a generous heart and a great mind, a close friend of President Jimmy Carter's, and a man devoted to his family.

Of all the descriptors, it is this last one that has meant the most to me.

When we get together, we often talk until late in the evening, often assisted by an appropriate Scottish beverage of single malt origin. And no matter what subjects we talk about, eventually we talk about our experience as parents.

I still remember, with amazement, one night when we were deep in conversation and Brent quoted from memory lines from the sermon spoken by the father, the Reverend Maclean, from the movie, "A River Runs Through It."

You may recall the context of the sermon. Standing in the pulpit of the Presbyterian Church in Missoula, Montana, after the murder of the younger of his two sons, a hard-drinking, hard-gambling newspaper reporter with a gift for fly fishing, the Reverend Maclean said to his congregation:

"Each one of us here today will at one time in our lives look upon a loved one who is in need and ask the same question: We are willing to help, Lord, but what, if anything, is needed? For it is true we can seldom help those closest to us. Either we don't know what part of ourselves to give or, more often than not, the part we have to give is not wanted. And so it is, those we live with and should know elude us. But we can still love them - we can love completely without complete understanding."

These words are as true as anything I've ever heard.

There's no greater mystery in the world than the people we are closest to. They elude us however long we have known them. Familiar and utterly foreign, they share the intimacies of our lives. No one can bring us greater joy, and louder peals of laughter; no one else can so thoroughly break our hearts. "But," as the Reverend Maclean says, "we can still love them - we can love them completely without complete understanding."

But, as we also know, "love" is not a magic potion. You can't just pour on the affection and heal all our wounds. Love doesn't work like that. Sometimes love wounds. Sometimes intending to love, we act in ways that we (ourselves) don't understand. Love is not, as Leonard Cohen knew, "a victory march," it can be "a cold and lonely hallelujah."

But, it is a hallelujah - and we should never forget that either - even if the praise sometimes is spoken through tears. Love is still, by the grace of God, hallelujah. And that is exactly what we see in today's sermon text.

If ever there was a biblical Prince Charming, it was Absalom. Beautiful, handsome, gifted, strong, loved by everyone, we are told by the ancient chroniclers of Israel. He was King David's favorite son, and blessed with Davidic graces and talents -- and Davidic weaknesses, fanned by an ambition that would transform this young man not into a great king, but into a traitor, a usurper, a turncoat who raised arms against his own father to take the kingdom by force that would have been his in time by right.

Absalom was successful in charming the masses and in recruiting an army, and he was successful also in forcing his father into temporary exile. But, King David hadn't grown old as a monarch for nothing. He was a shrewd and cunning old fox and a military genius.

Through spy-craft, King David -- exiled from his fortresses -- bought the time he needed to raise his own army and to lure his son into a battle on ground of his own choosing. And Absalom's boundless self-confidence and arrogance drove him into his father's trap.

Even as Absalom's forces were slaughtered around him, David commanded that his son should remain untouched. No one was to harm Absalom. However, one of David's most trusted lieutenants countermanded the king's order for the king's good. And, as Absalom hung by his long beautiful hair in the branches of an oak tree, he was executed with three arrows through the heart.

We pick up this tragic story at the point when messengers are bringing word to the king about the battle's progress. And at the end of this passage, we hear David's heart-rending cry: "*O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you -- O Absalom, my son, my son!*"

Rabbinical scholarship of old condemns Absalom to hell for his rebellion against his father, King David. But if Absalom walked the streets of Hades, he must have seen the shadow of his father there too, enduring a hell of his own grief, loss, sorrow, broken-heartedness, regret. So much regret.

Soren Kierkegaard once famously said that *life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards*. Which is another way of saying that hindsight is 20/20.

The story of David and Absalom certainly has something to teach in this vein. But this story illuminates something even more important than just "*If I knew then what I know now I wouldn't repeat the same mistakes.*" This story illuminates something I've often found troubling in the Bible (and maybe you have found it troubling too), the idea that *the sins of the parents are visited upon their children* and their children's children.

Stated baldly, this sounds like a threat to me, the visitation of a relentless divine judgement upon the innocent, those yet unborn. Or, we might take it as a Hebrew version of Karma's multigenerational rule of moral cause and effect.

I suspect, however, that there's something more subtle at work in this familiar saying, not that David's sins (and they were many) were punished by the troubles in his family, but that everything we do somehow echoes for generations to come. And we do not, and we cannot, and we will not know exactly how our actions today will echo later, especially in the lives of those closest to us, including our children and our children's children.

Surely, David meant as expressions of overflowing affection all the gifts and indulgences he lavished upon Absalom. Just as surely, David probably never imagined that the privileges he enjoyed as a king of his time might ignite among his own children transgressions that would make him blush, and then weep. But isn't this true for all of us.

Little actions and large ones, small kindnesses and great extravagances, attempts to be good, and moral slips and tumbles make up our lives. And so many things we do take on lives of their own well beyond our intentions, and sometimes contrary to our wishes.

Such an awareness is enough to make us want to stay in bed in the morning, or maybe to hide underneath it.

How in the world are we to find the courage to live, let alone to love, when so many things we do cast such dark and such long shadows?

I think the answer to this question may lie in something the Reformed theologian Karl Barth once said. Barth actually made the comment in the context of teaching about Christian ethics and morality. He wondered aloud how we can find the courage to try to accomplish any sort of good thing in such a complex world, realizing that we understand so little even about our own motives. His comment applies here too in the most intimate of our relationships.

Barth said that the thing that gives us the courage to get out of bed in the morning and try to do something good comes from the fact that God has already forgiven us fully and forever. God's grace makes it possible for us to have the courage to live and love, and do the things we think need to be done.

Those of you who have read Norman Maclean's book, "A River Runs Through It," or who have seen the film, will remember a subplot. Norman and his brother, both sons of the Reverend Maclean, have taken Neal, the brother of Norman's girlfriend, fishing.

This guy, Neal, is a mess. He's a sad and pathetic phony. While the brothers are fishing Neal has run off into the woods with a woman he met at a bar, leaving his clothes behind but taking with him a large bottle of bootlegged hooch.

Norman's brother, the one who will be murdered soon because of the way he lives and the gambling debts he owes, tells Norman. "*You should try to help him.*"

Norman's not convinced that his trying to help his girlfriend's brother Neal will help, and he really doesn't think Neal is worth helping.

"You should try to help him," his brother persists. You may not like him. He may not like you. *"Maybe so... but maybe what he likes is somebody trying to help him."*

Norman reflects later on what his brother said. *"I still do not understand my brother. He himself always turned aside any offer of help, but in some complicated way he was surely talking about himself when he was talking about Neal needing help."*

"Come on," his brother says, *"let's find him before he gets lost in the storm."*

Among all the hopes in our lives, and all our regrets, our praises and laments, we live and we try to love, and sometimes we try to help each other. We know our love is imperfect, but imperfect as it is, it is still needed. And imperfect as our love may be, God's grace forgives its deficits. And maybe that's enough.

Amen.