

## 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

**II Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; Psalm 130; John 6:35, 41-51; Ephesians 4:25—5:2**

**II Samuel 18:5-33** is the story of the death of David's rebellious son, Absalom. David's army defeats those Israelites in revolt against him and led by Absalom. But although David had given strict orders that Absalom was to be taken alive, he too is killed.

There are three striking features to this tragic story. The first is David's response to the victory of his army. Rather than rejoicing in their victory, David is clearly and overwhelmingly grieved at the death of his favored son. His words in 18:33 capture the profundity of his grief. "O my son Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom. Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" David's grief was so profound that the author of II Samuel tells us that the soldiers, returning to Jerusalem after routing Absalom's army and thoroughly extinguishing the rebellion, "stole into the city that day as soldiers steal in who are ashamed when they flee in battle" (19:3). David's grief, expressed in 18:33 conveys the depth of the anguish he experienced in the loss of his son. In spite of all the harm Absalom had caused in his rebellion against David and his attempt to seize the throne, David's grief blinds him to everything other than his son's death. As one commentator put it, "David is a father waiting for news of his son, not a king waiting for news of his enemy. The Cushite (the runner who broke the news to David) correctly identifies his tidings as good news for the *king*"<sup>1</sup>, not good news for a father!

Because of David's grief over Absalom's death, and because he seemed oblivious to the affect his grief was having upon his victorious army, his commanding general Joab had to take charge of the situation. And doing so, he spoke truth to power.

"Then Joab came into the house of 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 daughters, and the lives of your wives and your concubines, for 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. So 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" (19:5-7).

There is nothing subtle about Joab, and perhaps that bluntness earned him some of the animosity of the king (see the third point below). But it had to be said! And Joab was likely the only man who could get away confronting the king in this way! Sometimes confronting power can be most distasteful and may earn one resentment rather than praise. But "one has to do what one has to do". And thus that difficult task fell to Joab that day. And the result was bringing the king to his senses!

So Joab calls David to accountability for the way he has allowed his parental grief to obfuscate his kingly responsibility. And David recognizes that Joab is right. And David honored and praised the troops that night while hiding his grief (19:8). Thus, his kingdom – and his rule – was saved!

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* (Nashville, TN.: Abingdon Press, 2003), pp. 406-407.

The second striking feature in this story is the symbolism used through stones. The text tells us in 18:18 that Absalom “had set up for himself a pillar that is in the King’s Valley. It is called Absalom’s Monument to this day”. This was an action similar to a Pharaoh’s decision to build a pyramid for himself or an Assyrian or Babylonian king creating a statute of himself. Absalom had envisaged for himself becoming the king of the Israelite Empire his father had built – and not waiting for his father’s death to assume that empire! In an act of extreme braggadocio, before even being crowned the king, he had erected a pillar of remembrance for himself, and had done so in the “King’s Valley”, where all of Israel’s monarchs were to be buried.

Instead, the text tells us, upon Absalom’s death, his murderers “threw him into a great pit in the forest, and raised over him a very great heap of stones” (18:17). Absalom was not buried in his intended tomb (at the foot of the pillar) but in a forest, covered with a “great heap of stones”. The way the grave of an exceedingly notorious criminal, traitor or enemy of the king would be marked was by a “heap of stones” (cf. Josh. 7:26; 8:29). Thus, Absalom had planned great glory for himself. But instead, he was branded a traitor and a criminal under a great pile of stones!

The third striking feature in this story is David’s growing antipathy toward his commanding general, Joab. David had given explicit orders for his troops to capture Absalom and spare his life, not to kill him. Joab, on the other hand, orders his death. Absalom, when fleeing the battlefield, was caught in the branches of a tree, thus hanging helplessly between the tree and the ground. The soldier that found him, aware of David’s order, comes to Joab on the battlefield and reports his discovery to the general. Joab orders him to return to the pretender and to kill him. The soldier refuses, knowing that if he thus breaks the king’s command, Joab will not defend him but will leave him “dangling”, as well. Joab therefore goes ahead on his own and personally kills Absalom.

This was the latest, and probably the most severe, of Joab’s disobedient actions that earns David’s enmity. David is not in a position to punish Joab for this action, because the king needs him too much to restore order in Israel. But David bides his time until, years later, he can command the execution of Joab (I Kings 2:5-6, 28-34).

What is clearly confirmed in Joab’s murder of Absalom (18:9-15) is the evaluation of Joab that appears throughout II Samuel. Joab is revealed as an able and astute general, extremely effective in warfare and highly competent in the performance of that role. But the text also displays him as a man who uses power unilaterally and despotically for his own ends. He is seen as manipulative, crafty and always seeking his own ends (rather than simply obeying the king). David needs him because of his skill at warfare. But because of his consistent use of power for his own ends, he must be tolerated rather than admired. Joab does not come forth as a general with the integrity of an Abner (Saul’s commanding general), but as conniving, headstrong and fixated on building his personal power. Those attributes are clearly communicated in this story. And those attributes eventually cost him his life!

**Psalm 130** is a penitential psalm, appropriate for King David’s cry, ‘O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom. Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son’ (II Sam.

18:33)! But it is also a hymn of victory, for it concludes with the command and call, “O Israel, hope in the Lord, for with the Lord there is steadfast love” (Ps. 130:7).

Psalms 130 is a rich psalm that captures God’s work in us and in our midst. It begins, “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my cry! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications” (vss. 1-2)!

The psalmist acknowledges the unfathomable mercy of God in verses 3 and 4. If God were to “keep score” of our misdeeds – whether as individuals or as a nation (a community) – no one and nothing would be acceptable to God. But acceptance by God does not depend upon our making ourselves acceptable. It is based solely upon the steadfast love and forgiveness of God.

In that light, the instructions of the Psalmist are twofold. First, “wait for the Lord” (vss. 5-6) – that is, wait for his merciful intervention in our lives and in our nation. Second, “hope in the Lord” (vss. 7-8) – that is, live in an attitude of expectation for God’s intervention and the acting out of God’s steadfast love!

Wait! Hope! This is the essence of authentic response to God. Whether as a community or as an individual, live your life in expectation of what God will do in and through you and/or in your situation. And you can live in such expectation, “waiting” and “hoping” because you know that God is not a vindictive deity but us rather one who loves you and your people more than you love yourself! So Psalm 130 tells us to “wait” upon the Lord and to “hope” in his work in our situation, trusting that God will do what is best in that situation!

**John 6:35-51** begins with the first of Jesus’ “I Am” statements. They are, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (6:35), “I am the bread of life” (vs. 48), and “I am the living bread that came down from heaven” (vs. 51). These are extremely important statements both in the context of this story and within the Gospel of John.

Jesus has fed the 5000, has miraculously walked on the Sea of Galilee and has criticized the crowd who has followed him for “looking for me, not because you saw signs (of God’s kingdom), but because you ate your fill of the loaves” (6:26; that is, they want more food). Now, he is addressing both the crowd and the “Judeans” (or “Jews”) – that is, the political, economic and religious establishment of Israel. The Judeans criticize Jesus for calling himself “the bread of life”, saying, “Who does he think he is? We know his parents, his family, his origins as a carpenter from Nazareth. He is simply a peasant, a no-body. Why should we bother to listen to him at all? (vss. 41-42)” Jesus responds to their effort to undermine him by developing his argument that he is not simply a peasant, but the “bread of life”. He does so by stating, “Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. 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! (vss. 49-51)”

This is the first of seven “I Am” statements made by Jesus in the Gospel of John (6:35-51; 8:12; 9:5; 10:7-14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1-15). What is of the greatest significance in these statements is that they not only declare who Jesus is in seven distinct ways. It is that Jesus dares to use the words “I am” (*ego eimi*) in referring to himself.

In the Septuagint version (the Greek translation) of the Hebrew Scripture, the response by God to Moses’ request for God’s name in the incident of the burning bush is “Ego Eimi” (translated into English, “I Am Who I Am”; Exodus 3:14). In other words, *ego eimi* was the Greek translation of the Hebrew four-letter word, “YHWH” (pronounced “Yahweh”). Because *ego eimi* was used in the Septuagint as the name of God, Greek-speaking Jews never used those words in any other way than to refer to Yahweh. They would never have the effrontery of using it for themselves!

Therefore, when John as a Greek-speaking Jew would write, “*Ego eimi*” for each of Jesus’ “I Am” statements, it would not occur to him to be using those words in any other way than to have Jesus saying, “I am Yahweh!” In the case of 6:35, for example, Jesus was actually saying, according to John, “I, Jesus-Yahweh, am the bread of life!” That was what was so offensive and even blasphemous in what Jesus was saying when he declared, “I am the bread of life”. That was what elicited the Judean’s response, “Who does he think he is?” (6:42) And that was why they conspired together to eliminate him!

How, then, will the people and Israel’s systems respond to this startling revelation that Jesus is Yahweh? Jesus responds to the Judeans’ criticism of what he has just declared, by saying “No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me” (vss. 44-45).

“Hearing” and “learning” indicate human responsiveness to God. Who will “hear” and “learn”, Jesus in essence asks. It will be those who will be “drawn by the Father” to Jesus. It will be those who can perceive the new way God is at work in the world, no longer through obedience to the Law that has been corrupted by Israel’s priests, religious and political leaders and Israel’s wealthy in order to build and secure their power. It is God who will draw to Jesus those who will embrace rather than reject Jesus (as these leaders of Israel are doing by questioning his origins). “The heart is naturally hard and will not accept God’s invitation, unless a special work of grace takes place”.<sup>2</sup> Those in power have too much to lose to allow their hearts to be warmed. So are those who are under the influence of the powers. Only those in whom God is already at work are given the capacity by God to embrace *Ego Eimi* as the Yahweh he truly is!

The text ends with a reference back to Israel’s wilderness wanderings, when they first discovered God as *Ego Eimi*. “I AM the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am that living bread” (6:48-51).

Jesus recalls the gifts of manna (Exod. 16) and water out of the rock (Num. 20:9-13) as the gifts of God to the Israelites in the desert that satisfied their hunger and thirst. But that satisfaction was only temporary, sufficing only for a day. Thus, the manna and water had to be provided for the Israelites every day. But now, Jesus is saying, God will provide for those who will receive it

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<sup>2</sup> *The Reformation Study Bible* (Orlando, FL: Ligonier Ministries, 2005), p. 1522.

eternal manna and water through the Bread of Life. “For whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (6:51). Thus, Jesus is suggesting that the Eucharist will become the symbol and the image that reminds Christians and the Church that their full sufficiency lies in Christ, and not in the principalities and powers of the world!

**Ephesians 4:25—5:2.** In the epistle lesson for last Sunday’s lectionary, we examined Paul’s “battle plan” (or, in other words, his essential strategy) by which the church would be emboldened to move out into public life. Simply put, that “battle plan” was for the church’s spiritual leaders to prepare all Christians to do public ministry. What was so powerful and potentially influential in that plan is that, if followed, it would involve every Christian in the ministry of public life. Every Christian would be about seeking the transformation of society into God’s shalom community. For that plan provided a way for the church’s leaders to train and equip the people for such public ministry. If this plan were to be taken seriously and implemented by the church, then it would have a powerful impact upon the world, would make the church exceedingly relevant to everyday life, and would build the shalom community. In the light of such a battle plan, the remainder of the book of Ephesians now builds Paul’s case for how the church should work to impact Roman and Israelite culture, and work toward their transformation into the shalom community.

Paul begins his exploration of how the church should work to impact its culture by producing what appears to be a grocery list of “do’s” and “don’ts”. He writes, “So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you” (4:25-32).

Do not lie. Do not get angry. Do not steal. Do not talk in ways that harm others. Do not grieve God. Do not act with bitterness, wrath and anger. Do not slander one another. Do not act with malice.

Speak the truth. Practice self-control. Labor honestly. Share with the needy. Build up people through what you say to them. Be kind to each other. Be tenderhearted. Forgive one another.

It seems like a list of “do’s” and “don’ts”. And some of those “do’s” and “don’ts” are rather intriguing. For example, when Paul states that we are to allow “no evil talk” to come out of our mouths, the Greek word for evil that he uses, *saprose*, literally means “rank, foul, rotten, putrid”; that is, he is saying, “no swearing” or no derogatory statements about anyone else should ever be uttered by you. Likewise, when Paul instructs us to “be kind to one another”, he actually creates a play on words because the Greek word he uses when he selects the word “kind” is *chrestoi*, and

the word “Christ” he uses in the same sentence is *Christos*; the two words sound almost identical when the passage is read out loud! Thus, Paul is saying, “be *chrestoi* to one another, so that you will be like *Christos*!” That, in turn, sets up the reader for what he will write in the very next sentence – Ephesians 5:1-2 – and its emphasis to be a “Christ” to one another!

The metaphor Paul is using in this passage is one of taking off old, frayed, dirty clothing and to replace it with new, whole and clean clothing. We are to “put off” our old pagan life and we are to “put on” Christ (4:22-24). What Paul has actually done in our epistle lesson for today is to present six concrete ways Christians can “put off” their pagan lives and “put on” Christ by turning:

- ? From lying to telling the truth (4:25, 26);
- ? From uncontrolled anger to self-control (4:26, 27)
- ? From stealing to useful labor (4:28);
- ? From harmful to helpful speech (4:29-30);
- ? From bitterness to love (4:31-5:2);
- ? From unrestrained sexual desires to a thankful acknowledgement of God’s good gifts (including the gift of sexuality) (5:3-5).<sup>3</sup>

Paul then concludes these instructions with the words, “Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (5:1-2). This summarizes all that was listed before. Our bottom line as Christians, as we engage in both private and public life, is to be “imitators of God” – as “Christ-ones” (which is, literally, what the word “Christian” really means) in all that we say and do and are. That is the first step of any engagement in public life. Because people will always pay attention more to what you are than what you say!

Why would Paul create a “grocery list” like this one of proper Christian behavior and attitude? Well, stop and think for a moment of the difficulty Paul would face in starting churches in communities where there were no models of Christian life. How would newly converted Christians know how a Christian should act?

For Jewish Christians, that would pose no problem because they had a history of 1,200 years of ethical behavior built around the practice of a politics of justice, an economics of equitable distribution of wealth and a highly relational religion. In a Jewish community, Christians would simply act ethically like Jews at their very best!

But if a church were planted in a Gentile community, how would one communicate how Christians should live? The Greek and Roman cultures held to entirely different standards than what either Jews or Christians would consider appropriate ethics. For example, in the pagan world, it was not only considered acceptable but it was highly expected that each man would have sexual relations with a prostitute as a part of his worship of the deity. Likewise, religious obligation was fulfilled by making sacrifices to and worshipping the emperor. Killing of people,

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<sup>3</sup> The final item in the list does not appear in our epistle lesson for today (4:25-5:2), but is the subject of 5:3-5. It is therefore part of the list, and needs to be included to complete Paul’s thoughts on the matter.

as well as animals, was done for sport and to entertain the crowds. Profligacy in sexual relationships, both heterosexual and homosexual, was expected at the daily baths. Much of the ethics of both Roman and Greek culture were built upon the abuse of power, greed, a highly manipulative religious system and licentiousness. What leading Christians would consider wrong would be considered normal activities for Romans. And what Christians would expect to do would often be interpreted by Romans as weakness.

Frankly, Gentiles recently converted to Christianity didn't know how to act! So what Paul was doing in our epistle lesson for today and throughout the book of Ephesians was to instruct recently converted pagans on how Christians should act both in public and with each other. Often, being Christian means such concrete instruction and admonition, particularly in the face of the standards, values and passions of the non-Christian world!

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(Cycle B Ordinary Time 19.doc)