



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 12 – Proper 14 Year B

Enough to Raise the Dead

[RCL]: 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; Psalm 130; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

Travel to the city of Rome and go to the basilica named for St. Peter. Near the main entrance, you will find one of the most celebrated sculptures in the world, the Pieta of Michelangelo.

Mary the mother of Jesus is shown seated. On her lap, in her arms, she holds the lifeless body of her son, newly brought down from the cross. You may be familiar with this eloquent work in marble. Perhaps you have stood before it.

Blessed Mary appears quite young. And somehow the body of her adult son rests on her lap without seeming awkward. The Pieta possesses a strange beauty and grace that engages the viewer.

We are invited to contemplate the sorrow that floods her heart. It is a sorrow uniquely her own. Yet it is also universal, the sorrow that arises in our hearts in the face of death when the corpse is a child, a young person, someone innocent.

The Pieta thus presents with sublime eloquence the loss Mary felt when she cradled the dead body of her child, the sorrow that enveloped the heart of our Savior's earthly parent.

Today's selection from the Second Book of Samuel is the last in a long series of Sunday readings that focus on David, Israel's greatest king. This last selection does not recount his death in old age. Instead, it recounts the murder of a young man, the king's son, Absalom, and the grief that seizes David as a result.

An unforgettable moment in biblical literature confronts us: David the king, deeply moved, retreats to an upstairs chamber, weeps as he goes, and cries out repeatedly, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

Absalom is murdered by David's soldiers because he had revolted against his father, claiming the kingdom for himself. That rebellion must be put down, yet King David tells his forces that for his sake they should deal gently with the young man Absalom.

The royal command is ignored. David's general and ten soldiers surround Absalom and kill him in the forest of Ephraim. They subject his body to a disgraceful burial, tossing it into a hole in a field, then covering it with a big pile of stones.

David does not celebrate this rebel's defeat. He remains instead a father. We hear in his outcry a father's grief at the murder of his child.

Part of what it means for scripture to be inspired is that it contains several levels of meaning. In this portrait of David, the grief-stricken father, there is something more than what happens in history, time and again. We have here also a reminder of what happens inside the Trinity.

The cross brings suffering to the Father as well as the Son. The Son dies a real death. The Father suffers a real bereavement. Together Father and Son are one in the Spirit, and the cross reveals the Spirit as an abyss of sorrow. This is what the Godhead undergoes freely—for us.

If David, a sinful human like us, laments loudly the killing of his rebel son, then the death of Jesus, who obeys the will of God, brings grief past our ability to imagine to the heart of his father. The Father accepts this grief even as the Son accepts his death. They do so freely. Love is the motive.

So, in the *Pieta* of Michelangelo, we have the image of the sorrow felt by the mother of Jesus over his death.

And in the story from Second Samuel, we have something that points to the grief felt by the heavenly Father over that death.

It is a mistake to suggest that while God the Son suffers for us, God the Father does not. The Father of our Savior knows a unique brand of suffering because of the death of his Son, even as King David experiences heartbreak because of the death of Absalom.

God the Father is not nailed to a cross. Yet God the Father knows the pain of witnessing his Son nailed to a cross. God the Father suffers due to the death of his Son. This is an important insight. It makes a difference regarding practical matters.

Many people choose not to understand God in this way. They can perhaps abide the suffering Son and his grieving mother, but not the suffering Father. Their view of reality demands a strict Father not only at the center of the Godhead, but also in society and personal life.

The Strict Father imposes harsh discipline, using violence if necessary. The Strict Father abstains from tears, even at the death of his child. There is no room to question the Strict Father. Control is the key. The goal in this worldview is for each person to become his or her own Strict Father. Let each be ready to do violence to others, violence to self, in the interest of maintaining control.

Order is abundant, of course, in the Strict Father world. What that world lacks are empathy and compassion. In some of his writings, especially *Moral Politics*, the American linguist George Lakoff explores the bleak landscape of the Strict Father world.

David crying out in grief at the loss of his rebel son. Mary cradling the corpse of Jesus at the foot of the cross. God the Father left grief-stricken at the death of God the Son. All this constitutes a standing challenge to the sovereignty of the Strict Father.

There are Strict Father versions of Christianity, for sure, but they fall fatally short of the truth of the Gospel. The most authentic Christianity is presented by the tears of David, the tears of Mary, the tears of God. The most authentic Christianity does not surrender empathy and compassion in order to purchase the illusion of control.

Instead, what we find is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ keeps challenging the Strict Father regime in the interest of a heavenly Father who is not afraid to weep.

This challenge takes place not only in sanctuaries but in halls of government and private homes, in public squares and the depths of the human heart. God wants us to surrender our control needs and become as human as he is in Christ. A willingness to weep places us on the road to personal and collective salvation.

Someone may say that this builds a significant edifice on a slim biblical foundation, namely a particular reading of David's grief. But this theme of the Father who suffers runs through the two testaments.

The great Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel finds this God everywhere in the writings of the biblical prophets.

Jesus announces that mourners are blessed. It is possible that the chief mourner of all is God the Father, and that the coming of his reign on earth as in heaven will be the blessing this grief-stricken Father will receive.

Jesus also tells a story about a father and his two sons. Each of the sons turns out to be a disappointment to his father. The younger one leaves and lives a dissolute life. The elder stays back and hardens his heart. Each boy dies in a different way.

But when the moment of crisis arrives for each, the father is there, stronger than grief, welcoming home both the prodigal party boy and the son who had become a strict father. Jesus concludes the story before we know how each son responds. Yet there's reason to hope that the old man's tears are enough to raise the dead.

That story is not just about them. That story is about us. Each one of us is the prodigal party boy or a hard-hearted strict father or even something of both.

This Eucharist and every Eucharist is the celebration that God the Father puts on to welcome us home. The only question that matters, and the one that answers all the rest, is this one: Will you partake of the feast of faith? Will you take for your own a broken-hearted God?

We are dead people. Dead rebels. Dead authoritarians. But God sees us not simply as ourselves, but in his child Jesus.

And the tears of God the Father as he beholds the suffering of his Son are enough to raise the dead.

The Rev. Charles Hoffacker lives in Greenbelt, Maryland with his wife Helena Mirtova and serves as priest associate at St. John's Episcopal Church in Beltsville, Maryland. He is the author of A Matter of Life and Death: Preaching at Funerals (Cowley Publications). Many of his sermons appear on sermonwriter.com. He can be reached at charleshoffacker8@gmail.com.