

Honoring Trauma
First Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:26
Second Reading: 2 Samuel 1:1, 12, 17-27

Through the years I've participated in innumerable funerals, memorial services, celebrations of life, graveside committals, and inurnments, and yet geography and the relentless return of the Sabbath have prohibited my presence at a number of funeral services for relatives in my own extended family. I've always regretted that, and frankly, there are a couple of services I would have liked to attend just for the spectacle itself.

Aunt Opal was always a good visit in the sense that for a young boy, visiting aunts can seem a tad excruciating what with the dearth of toys, the awkward efforts to communicate with an adult who has no frame of reference for your world, and of course, the utter lack of highly processed snacks to indulge apart from those stale nasty candies that to my mind must require a minimum age of 75 to purchase and appreciate. Horehound — what is it and how does that qualify as candy. But Aunt Opal was different. She liked kids, particularly boys, and had this down-home-small-town sense of humor that resonated with me. She called her husband, my Uncle Leslie, “Fats,” and thus, so did everybody else. Opal could tell a story in a way that

drew you in and made you giggle. We never had to suffer through liver or pickled beets at Opal's. She'd take us out for root beer and cheeseburgers.

Time and the ribbon of I-40 interrupted that connection, but I was disappointed and saddened not to be present for her small graveside committal service in Benton, MO, pop. 500, and according to my family, it was quite the scene. First, there was the asthmatic dog, brought by a cousin's cousin, who snorted and moaned through the whole service. Then, there was Opal's friend who had taken the liberty of recording herself on a cassette at home, playing on her Sears and Roebuck electric organ, and singing her tortured rendition of what she said were Opal's favorite hymns. So, there at the graveside, she stood silently before the casket, holding a boombox, and pressed the play button for the benefit of the bereaved. My sister about convulsed trying to contain her laughter, and my mom, Mrs. Perfect Pitch, visibly winced in pain. The dog, meanwhile, just moaned and snorted along with the music.

It was just a few years later when Opal's only son, my cousin Van, died. His was a sad journey of loneliness punctuated by an impersonal graveside service that hardly anyone attended. My cousin's cousins were

there again, but apparently left the dog at home this time, probably because they wouldn't have room in the truck. You see, after Van's service my parents and sister went over to clean my aunt's house, knowing Van had let the house deteriorate after my aunt died, i.e., they knew it was rubber glove and Lysol time.

To their surprise, however, they found that the house had already been cleaned out. Oh, the filth was still there, the junk was there, the trash was certainly there, but my cousin's cousins had apparently come by before the service and taken everything that held any value. You see, Van probably owned more guns than the Benton police department and had crossed the borderline between collector and hoarder. What I would call a pathology, my cousin's cousins would apparently call a goldmine. Before Van's body was in the ground, the cousins had cleaned him out, leaving just the junk and filth behind.

It wasn't necessarily the presumption of the act itself that was so offensive, as it was the timing and the opportunism of this stealth seizure of valuables. A friend and fellow pastor once had an attorney friend tell him, "Richard, I'm glad you are able to offer consolation to the family in this

environment, and don't have to witness how incredibly ugly and mean and cutthroat they can be when they get to my office to argue over the estate." I can only imagine how hurtful it would be to have your child measuring your favorite chair, thinking about his family room layout, while you are still sitting in it. I wouldn't be surprised if some overeager heirs had the dude from *Antiques Roadshow* at the wake of a relative, making appraisals and dodging the guests gathering at the buffet table. The writer, Ambrose Bierse said, "Death is not the end. There remains the litigation over the estate."

When a life is reduced to the opportunities a person's death presents, we as a people have lost our way. When opportunism eclipses honor and integrity, respect and goodness, all that defines grace is cast aside.

David understood this and poetically avoids this trap in our text today. What we have here is an elegy, a poem honoring King Saul and his son Jonathan following their deaths. A little backstory here is helpful.

In the last few weeks we have observed Israel ignoring the Lord's counsel, and pursuing their demand for a king so that they could be like the neighboring nations, having a king to fight their battles. The Lord relents and gives them their king, anointing Saul to the role. But Saul departs from

the ways of the Lord, and thus loses the Lord's favor, whereupon the Lord anoints David to be Israel's future king, a move that is inevitably fraught since Israel already has a king.

So, David soon has what ballplayers call a hot streak, felling the giant Goliath, and crushing Israel's opponents in battle while also breaking out his guitar and providing music therapy for the emotionally unstable King Saul. That's an odd dual job description to be sure. Nevertheless, David's star was rising to the point that his presence was no longer therapeutic for Saul, but only enflamed Saul's spirit with jealousy and paranoia. Saul was particularly irked when returning from battle he heard the people singing — "*Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands.*" Saul was additionally cheesed by the evolving bromance between his son Jonathan and David. His jealousy now at the boiling point, Saul on two separate occasions unceremoniously interrupts David's music therapy sessions by trying to pin David to the wall with a spear.

So, Jonathan tells his friend David the obvious, that it's time for David to get out of Dodge before he's carried out to a grave. Now, David is on the run; can't go home and hang with the sheep; can't crash at the king's estate;

he's got no place to go; there's no job; there's no money. Cue the Jackson Browne, *Running on empty*... David was on the run, Saul was in pursuit. Yet, on two occasions during this chase scene, when David had the opportunity to kill Saul, he would not, could not do it, even regretting the time his sword sliced off the corner of Saul's cloak. David would not, could not destroy the one who had been anointed by the Lord. So, the chase continued as Saul sought to kill David.

Well, David finally found a place to land ... Gath. Now, that may not immediately ring a bell, so let me refer you to the scripture we read last week — *And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath, of Gath*. Do you see it? David, the anointed future king of Israel finds refuge and a job with the Philistines, the arch enemies of Israel. It was a great free agent pickup for King Achish of Gath, because the Philistines knew better than anyone that David was the GOAT when ranking warriors. And David lived up to his reputation, routing the Geshurites, the Girzites, and the Amalekites. His success was such that Achish, the Philistine king of Gath, told David that David would be his bodyguard for life.

However, guess who was next on the Philistines' smackdown schedule? Israel. David would now be going up against his own people, the very ones for whom he had been anointed to be their future king. That's what psychologists call *a double bind*, confronted with two irreconcilable obligations. Achish knew that with David, victory was a lock, and yet, the rest of the Philistines weren't so confident. They didn't trust David and feared he would quickly flip sides, so David was fortuitously not permitted to join the battle caravan.

Nevertheless, when the battle commenced, things did not go well for Israel. In 1 Samuel 31, we read — *“Now the Philistines fought against Israel; and the men of Israel fled before the Philistines, and many fell on Mount Gilboa. The Philistines overtook Saul and his sons; and the Philistines killed Jonathan and Abinadab and Malchishua, the sons of Saul. The battle pressed hard upon Saul; the archers found him, and he was badly wounded by them.”* Knowing the horrors in store for a vanquished king, Saul asked his sword bearer to kill him, and when the sword bearer balked, Saul fell on his own sword and died, and the sword bearer did the same.

Thus, the king of Israel, Saul, is dead. So, is this a *carpe diem* moment for David? Seize the day ... Call Tiffany's, and have the gemologist meet him down at the local goldsmith shop to design a custom-fitted crown. Set up Zoom interviews with potential public relations firms. Promise the movers and shakers a seat on the cabinet, choose a caterer for the coronation ... Nope. David won't do it.

When David hears the news of Saul's death, rather than plotting his plan to seize the throne, he writes an emotional poem, an elegy honoring Saul and his dearest of friends, Jonathan. He directs all of Israel to hear it and learn it. This is not a time for opportunity. This is a time for respect, for integrity, for honor, for a generosity of spirit, for a space to acknowledge a grief than runs deep through the nation — *“Your glory, O Israel, lies slain upon your high places! How the mighty have fallen! ... Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! In life and in death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul... I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me ... How the mighty have fallen.”*

For all of his flaws, David comprehended the meaning of the moment. This was not a moment for posturing, campaigning, plotting, propaganda, or casting aspersions on Saul and broadcasting Saul's failures as a means to grasp the power and the throne for himself. This was not a time to air resentments. This was not a time to sneak in Saul's house and seize the valuables. This was not a time for self-interest, self-aggrandizement, self-advancement. No, this was a time to acknowledge a national grief, a time for reflection on how all the internecine striving and political scheming and lust for power had brought Israel to this sorry state of brokenness, discord, and loss. This was a time that sounds eerily familiar in our time.

Can you see it? Self-interest, tribalism, opportunism, greed, resentment, everyone wanting to win and far too few wanting to serve. What did the Israelites demand of the Lord? *God, give us a king so that he may go fight our battles for us.* Are our designs and schemes that much different? It's always someone else's responsibility to fight our battles for us; Our mistakes are always all someone else's fault; thus, no acceptance of responsibility, no thought of the common good, no time for justice, no rolling up of sleeves, no setting aside of differences. Look to ancient Israel and learn the lesson. If you've been following the scriptural witness these

past weeks, you may recall that this state of grief and brokenness, mistrust and perpetual conflict is exactly the place the Lord had said Israel would be if they pursued their agenda and forsook the agenda of the Lord. They would wind up in a place of great grief and lament.

David understood the moment. A people, and their leaders, in pursuit of their own agendas, wound up in a place of grief and lament. David would have his share of faults and failures, making his own contribution to the breakdown of Israel's national desires, but in this case, he comprehended the extent of Israel's pain and his own pain, their loss and his loss, their brokenness and his brokenness. This wasn't a time for posturing, gloating, acting on resentments, or seizing on the vulnerability of the people to advance his own brand. This was a time to honor the lost, acknowledge their own brokenness, remember their covenant with the Lord, a time to do better and be better. David understood the moment. Do we? It's a cautionary tale. Will we have the courage to learn from it? 9/11 — Do you remember how devastating that was, the shock, the death toll, the collapse of the twin towers? And do you remember the way people came together, despite all their differences, to honor the dead, to care for the living, to express solidarity? Would such a response to trauma even be possible

today? I'm not confident that we as a people would be up to it. So much division, so much blame, so much self-interest.

In every life there are moments, moments when you must choose between self-interest and honor, between avarice and integrity, between power and goodness, between resentment and a generosity of spirit, between greed and the common good. As a culture, a society, so many of the strivers, leaders, and influence peddlers before us are not meeting the moment. There is a lot we cannot control, but there is always, in every moment, something we can do, individually and in community — honor, integrity, goodness, generosity of spirit, pursuing the common good.

The Apostle Paul said, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." That's basically what David was doing, and in that moment, he got it right. Will we? Remember the paradox of the cross of Jesus — the ultimate witness to human brokenness and the failure of human agendas, this instrument of torture and death upon which Christ is crucified, is transformed into the instrument of our redemption, the ultimate witness to the power of love, and the hope that is only found through God's agenda. David understood

the moment — honor, not hate; mercy, not retribution; love, not
resentment. Jesus embodied the moment. What will we do in this moment?

Amen.