Personal Crisis and Present Hope
First Reading: Colossians 1:17-23
Second Reading: 2 Samuel 18:1-3a, 5-9, 14-15, 31-33

I'm not a fan of reality shows because I find it hard to swallow that much self-serving rudeness in one sitting. I'm thinking if that is their reality, they deserve one another, and I'll switch to a replay of Ping Pong at the Olympics. What was the advertisement for one of those reality shows? *It's not reality, it's actuality.* I think not. Yet, your actuality or my reality can never be flawless because relationships necessitate humans, and no one can dispute that humans are flawed. We covered that last week, right? If we claim to be without sin, we are self-deceived and are strangers to the truth.

So, we enter this place with the blessings, joys, and graces received through the families that have or have had a claim on us, but we also enter this place with the nicks and bruises, wounds and disillusionments, insecurities and questions that life in a family, any family have given us. You know, it seems appropriate that most obituaries have the list that begins — *Survivors include…* — because aren't we all survivors of a sort?

Did I have a perfect relationship with my parents? …Ah, no. Did you? Did I love my parents and know that my parents loved me? Yes, imperfectly,

but yes, I have no doubt. Each of us brings a carload of complexities and a wagon full of quirks to the family room, breakfast room, boardroom, break room, schoolroom, club, or sanctuary. Abiding with or navigating through those complexities and quirks makes up much of the substance of life.

My father and I approached a crisis differently. His engine accelerated to frantic and on to panic quickly. As with a lot of things in life, I was slower, in this case, much slower to the red zone of panic. A regular conversation for us was Dad saying — *We've got to go NOW! We're already late.* And me responding, — *Dad, it doesn't start for another hour, and we're 5 minutes from the event.*

Don't be late! Don't make a scene! These were constant pleas, which is kind of funny because I'm an introvert. I would rather die than make a scene. And secondly, as an introvert, I didn't want to go in the first place. Two people … two storage units full of quirks. I know I drove him to distraction, as did he to me, but the love and connection, though sometimes strained, were seldom in doubt. He walked me to kindergarten, taught me drive a stick shift *(which might qualify as a reality episode in itself)*. He lugged boxes to my dorm room at Mizzou, got lost on the way to my

wedding, and was determined to be there for Seth's college graduation, busting my chops the whole way because I made him use the wheelchair. Always imperfect, yet steadfast.

Strains, pains, flaws, foibles, quarrels, and clashes — rarely, if ever, does a relationship, any relationship escape these, even the relationships hallowed in those effusive Facebook posts and gushing Christmas letters.

One of the blessed gifts of scripture is its honesty in relating the fragilities, failures, and flaws that mark human relationships. There are no heroes in the Bible. As with us, there are only fragile and flawed people to whom God gives God's steadfast love, and through whom God reveals God's extraordinary grace. You've heard of tough love? Well, the Bible, along with our own life witness make it clear that at times, we are tough to love.

The difficulty of our readings from 2 Samuel this summer is that the Bible has refused to allow us to escape without confronting the truth that God's chosen, anointed, and beloved child David was a deeply flawed individual, who while a gifted and effective leader, beloved by the Lord, was also capable of reckless opportunism and guilty of immeasurable harm. We leave the story clear-eyed, understanding more deeply God's unrelenting

love, God's refusal to give up on us, and that while our faithfulness is fleeting, God's mercy is enduring.

Over these recent weeks we have witnessed David's unconventional selection as Israel's future king; his youthful insouciance as he confronted Goliath; his rare collection of talents that brought him into the presence of the king he would replace; his charisma that attracted fans and followers; his decency in refusing to kill Saul, the king he would replace; his military genius and entrepreneurial leadership; and his unifying voice that brought a nation together. David's rise and God's favor make for one of the most compelling narratives in Israel's history.

And yet, with David's rapid ascendency we begin to sense the pitfalls of power and prosperity. With King David, now in power, we see the emergence of widening cracks in his character as he falls prey to impulse, entitlement, and impunity. With the introduction of Bathsheba and Uriah to the narrative, we see David make a good run at breaking the majority of the Ten Commandments. He's coveting, dishonoring, stealing, adulterating, lying, conspiring, murdering, and even supplanting God at the center of his universe. And David accomplishes all of this iniquity without leaving his

own household, a household already housing seven wives and enough children to start a marching band. Young couples may look forward to the pitter patter of little feet around the house, but there was a thundering herd tearing through David's family room. There is Amnon, Chileab, Absalom, Adonijah, and Tamar along with a minimum of 14 others, and those are just the ones named in the Bible. That's a lot of Nikes.

Do you know the biggest myth that parents refuse to let go of? The belief that they can hide their character flaws, insecurities, pathologies, neuroses, emotions, and blunders from their children. When I hear someone say their marriage is going through a rough patch but they don't want the children to know and are maintaining normalcy to protect the children, what I'm thinking is — Are you kidding me? They know. In fact, surprise, surprise, the kids probably knew before they knew. The kids are watching. They are learning. In fact, the primary place your children learn about character and values and relationships is at home watching you.

So, when David is scrambling around trying to conceal and avoid accountability for what went down with Bathsheba and Uriah, the children were watching. They were listening and learning. This was their

schoolhouse for character, integrity, and relationship. And as the story of David's household continues, we discover that Paul wasn't kidding when he would later say that you reap what you sow, or that the Lord wasn't exaggerating when saying, *The sins of the father are visited upon the children to the third and fourth generation.*

A parent's nightmare evolves as the children of David grow into the practices, iniquities, jealousies, and conspiracies they learned by watching their father. Consumed with lust for his sister Tamar, Amnon assaulted her, and then loathed her for being violated. The son reflects the father. When Absalom heard of this, he took a chapter from David's book, conspiring to have his brother Amnon killed after David balked at punishing Amnon for his grievous sin against his sister Tamar. Absalom, now fearing what Dad will do, runs away for three years, until David brings him home.

Yet, the tension remains thick in David's house as Absalom is basically put in time-out for two years. Two years is a long time to think. Two years is a long time for a child's grievances against a parent to fester. So, when David finally grants Absalom permission to enter his presence, Absalom,

having learned the tricks of politics from Dad, proceeds with his own scheme to overthrow his father and take the throne.

Now, David is the one on the run, but David knows how to build an army, and so before long David's troops have Absalom cornered. Absalom, still sporting the sign of his high school rebellious period, a long thick mullet of hair, gets stuck in a tree with his jhery-curled tresses caught up in its limbs.

So, here we are, after all the drama, David is faced with a choice. He has the primary threat to his throne cornered, but the primary threat to his throne happens to be his son, Absalom. David may be asking how he got here, but at some level he knows. He knows his complicity in the brokenness and dysfunction that has overtaken his house, and that knowledge is a carrion eating its way through his heart. His officers awaiting battle instructions, David speaks with the tentative voice of one at war with his spirit. *"David mustered the men who were with him, and set over them commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds … The king ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, saying, 'Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.'"*

Enraged by his son's revolt and determined to not relinquish the throne, David cannot even bring himself to acknowledge that the leader of this coup is his own son, and yet, he also cannot bring himself to bring Absalom harm — *"Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom."*

Of course, the reader knows before David knows that Joab, David's hard-nosed, uncompromising general, has little patience with David's ambivalence, and so Absalom will not make it to his next appointment at the hair salon.

When David is told that his son Absalom is dead, we read the searing witness to David's devastation — *"The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"* Five times he calls out to the son he would not even identify as a son when the day began. The *"young man, Absalom,"* chief threat to David's rule is now the lost treasure of a father's heart, *"O Absalom, my son"* It is a tragic tale that is not redeemed by any rationalizations about David's strength in adversity or his willingness to persevere in spite of the

pain. No, this is the story of a gifted leader broken by his own bondage to power. The love of power crippled the power of love.

"Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son." These words witness to the depth of human fallibility which in some measure we all share. The arc of David's story is germane to every era of human activity and relationship. The pathos, the pain, the estrangement that we see writ large in the life of David, and own at some level in our own lives, form the pretext for the Gospel Word.

We are both heirs and patrons of a humanity created in the likeness of God but forever prone to resist trusting or obeying the Very One whose image we were born to bear. In *A Declaration of Faith*, we read —

> We confess that in all generations
> men and women have rejected God again and again.
> At times we seek in pride to become gods,
> denying the good limits that define us as creatures.
> At other times we draw back in apathy,
> refusing to fulfill our human responsibilities.
> The antagonisms between races, nations, and neighbors,
> between women and men, children and parents,

between human beings and the natural order,

are manifestations of our sin against God.

Jesus Christ, in coming into the world demonstrates the patience of a God who refuses to let us go in spite of our rebellion, and yet, at the same time, will not tolerate the continued fracture between God and humanity. As we will affirm in a moment, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ become personal crisis and present hope for all people when the gospel is proclaimed and believed. In Christ, God is reconciling all humanity to Godself. Refusing to abide the enmity that breaks us, Christ invades our hearts and begins sewing together that which has been torn apart. Paul expressed it this way to the Colossians — *"For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. And you who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled…"*

"*Estranged and hostile in mind"* I don't know … do you see any evidence of this these days? Have you witnessed this in your own family system? What David confronted and what we inevitably discover is that we are destined to make little progress in defeating estrangement and hostility

on our own. However, there is another way, a way marked by selfless love, boundless grace, and abundant mercy. *"For in [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things…"* Amen.