

As many of you know, this past Monday was the funeral for my Dad who died last Saturday. Funerals are a time to recognize the loss in one's life. Also, this has been the week when the national and statewide focus has been on the funerals of the 8 church members and their pastor who were killed in Charleston last week while participating in Bible study at Emanuel AME Church. A focus on loss.

Also as a nation we have been impacted this week by the Supreme Court decision to affirm that both heterosexual and homosexual couples can now legally get married across the US.

Alongside the Supreme Court's decision to uphold subsidies for the Affordable Care Act or Obamacare there is a lot that we could spend our time focused on today. But the text that appears in our sermon series on the early kings of Israel is this one out of II Samuel which we are about to read concerning loss and lament.

I can't help but think that it is providence that the Scripture we are about to read is a story of someone grieving the loss of someone important to them. Since this is the text we are, therefore, going to focus here today. I think it is important that we allow the scriptural text to guide us rather than us try to guide the scripture.

So since this scripture focuses on grief then we are going to direct our attention here today. The other issues that may be on our hearts and minds may need to be addressed next week from the pulpit. So if you are someone who may be grieving the loss of someone or something important to you then this story might be something that you can connect to.

If you have paid a lot of attention to the grief but grace emanating from Charleston then maybe this Scripture is speaking to you today.

We are in the middle of a focus on the Old Testament kings of Israel. We have read about how Samuel was the last judge to lead Israel but that the people demanded that they have a king like everyone else. God did not want for them to have a king. So Samuel pleads with God and God then allows Samuel to anoint Saul as the new king.

Saul proves to not be a very effective king and God expresses sorrow that God allowed Saul to become king. Samuel is then directed to find someone else who will become the new king. That new king turns out to be David.

Last week we read the story of David and Goliath. Goliath was the tall and powerful soldier in the Philistine army who intimidated anyone that he fought against. But even though David is described as a shepherd boy, David takes on the challenge to confront Goliath. David is dressed for battle in the strongest of armaments but these don't work for him. David says he will defeat Goliath not with great military weapons but with his sensibilities and his heart.

David chooses 5 small stones, places them into his slingshot, and drills Goliath in the head. Goliath is defeated and the rest of the Philistine army flees. Upon hearing the news of David's victory, rather than celebrating David's accomplishments, Saul begins to become quite jealous of David. The phrase, "Saul killed 1,000s but David killed 10,000s" becomes a popular chant. Each time he hears it Saul becomes more and more jealous of David.

So Saul plots to have David killed. But life gets very complicated because David marries Saul's daughter and David becomes best friends with Saul's son, Jonathan. In fact, Jonathan becomes a double agent. Jonathan continues to be a soldier in Saul's army but Jonathan keeps David informed about how Saul is trying to kill David. Saul's daughter, who is one of David's many wives because polygamy is biblical, also gives insider information to David to keep him alive.

Saul has an army and David has an army. In a very important scene, David and his army are hiding in a cave when Saul comes into the cave in order to go to the bathroom. David is in the darkness of the cave so Saul has no idea that he is in there. David has every chance to kill Saul at that moment. But God directs David to not kill his adversary and David listens to these words of God.

As Saul leaves the cave, David catches up to him. David informs Saul that God had spoken to him and instructed him that he was not to kill King Saul. David listens to the voice of God and refrains from harming Saul in any way.

Throughout this whole ordeal of Saul pursuing David and trying to kill him, David's relationship with Jonathan grows stronger and stronger. In fact, the scripture says that David's love for Jonathan was stronger than his love for any woman. But then tragedy strikes the young Jonathan. Jonathan leads Saul's army into another battle with the Philistines but this time Jonathan is killed. Defeated by the Philistines and facing no possible escape, Saul thrusts a sword into his own body.

David is heartbroken as he hears news of Jonathan's death. David shares his lament with these words.

Read II Samuel 1:17-27

David grieves over his close friend Jonathan. We cannot overlook how Scripture contains this poetry where David expresses his pain. Lamentation over the death of someone or something plays an important part in the Bible.

But we live in a culture that has a hard time lamenting. And that is why I think what is going on in Charleston is such an important lesson for the rest of the country. As one speaker shared at the funeral on Friday for Rev. Pinckney, pastor of Emanuel AME Church, "the gunman wanted to start a race war but he came to the wrong place at the wrong time."

The members of Emanuel are teaching us that grief can lead one to look for the grace in the midst of whatever sadness we may feel. For the folks at Emanuel it has meant families offering their forgiveness to the young man who gunned down their friends, relatives, and pastor. President Obama recognized this grace in his words which led him to sing "Amazing Grace" at the funeral on Friday.

As for me, my own grief has led me to seek out the grace which I have been surrounded by this week. I want to express my appreciation to all of you who have offered your words of support and encouragement. You have sent me messages through text, Facebook, and email. You have sent me cards in the mail which I have greatly appreciated.

Some of these cards have come from people who left this church for various reasons but they still felt the call to respond to me with grace. Several of you made the trip to Columbia for the visitation on Sunday and the funeral on Monday. You have given me the space I needed to take a break from my weekday activities so that I could focus on my own need to grieve. These acts are all signs of grace in the midst of my family's loss.

I have learned through the past week lessons that I think will help me to be a better pastor. For one, I learned that in grief I wanted to be left alone and sort emotions out on my own. For a couple of days I did not want to talk to anyone or perform any pastoral functions. I have learned from my own reaction to appreciate where others may need to be in their grief.

But what I learned more than anything is the importance of looking for God's grace wherever we face difficult and trying times. For me, grace came to me in reconnecting to my 4 brothers and sisters. I came to appreciate each of them and the gifts that they each bring. For me, grace came in the moment when I was able to tell my Dad good-bye and receive from him what I felt was a blessing that I will carry with me.

When we face difficult and trying times and when we mourn the death of someone we can go in a couple of different directions. We can focus on the loss and get stuck there. And by stuck I mean we focus on the past and what we had and wish to go back to something in our mind. If we focus only on the loss then we are looking to the past. If we focus only on the loss then we can continue down a lonely and dark road.

Or in our grief we can choose to try to keep an open eye to where God's grace is being revealed to us. We can look to the kind words from a stranger. We can look to the care of our friends. We can look to those family members that are there even if others are not. We can focus into the future and the ways that the light of Christ is being revealed.

Grief is tough. I know. I am there. But in our grief we can choose to focus on the grace extended to you and me by others. We can choose to focus on the light of Christ which is found in looking toward the future. AMEN.

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