

We may think that family conflict and dysfunctional families are something that is unique to each of our families. But if you want to read about dysfunctional families then the best place to read about them is to open up the Bible. The Bible, especially the Old Testament, is filled with God choosing dysfunctional families to carry out God's plans. Today we hear about one of these dysfunctional families.

Here at Allison Creek over the past several weeks we have been reading stories from the Old Testament about the early kings of Israel. The last two weeks we have read some very sordid tales from the book of II Samuel about King David that have included lust, infidelity, and rape. Unfortunately, the story that we have before us today also contains rape as a method of power and control.

Last week we read the story of David's son Amnon raping his half-sister Tamar. We read of how Amnon's brother Absalom was very upset with his brother and very upset at the way their father David handled the situation. David dished out no punishment against his son Amnon for raping his daughter Tamar. Today we turn to what happens next in this family as Absalom's anger toward his father and his brother turns into violence and war.

After Amnon's raping of Tamar, Absalom avenges his sister's rape by killing his brother Amnon. We are also told that Absalom then has 3 sons and one daughter. The daughter he names Tamar after her aunt who was raped. Absalom flees into exile but David reaches out to him, forgives him, and invites him back to Israel. But Absalom does not wish to move on in his relationship with his father and is driven by personal rage to defeat his father.

Absalom then promises people that he will be a more just and righteous king than his father David. Absalom then goes to Hebron, the first capital that David claims, and raises up an army that forces David to flee Jerusalem and cross the Jordan River.

Absalom, who was horrified by the rape of his sister, then carries out 10 rapes of his own upon David's concubines in order to show that he possesses more power than his father David. Once again innocent women are abused by powerful men seeking to show their own need for dominance against other men. Reminding us of the millions of women today like the Yizidi women in Iraq who are sex slaves around the world.

David then divides his army into 3 platoons under the leadership of his 3 most trusted military leaders. David is willing to go to battle himself but he is advised by his military leaders that this is not good strategy. David gives the orders to attack Absalom's army but to spare Absalom's life. David is very clear that he wants Absalom brought back alive.

David's army is successful against Absalom's army. David's army kills 20,000 of Absalom's army. But then the story takes a bizarre twist. Absalom is very proud of his long hair that he cuts only once a year. While riding a mule under an oak tree, Absalom gets his long, flowing hair caught in the tree and he can't untangle himself.

This incident is then reported to Joab, one of the three military leaders of David's army. Joab then goes to the place where Absalom is trapped in the tree. Joab pulls out three spears and plunges them into Absalom's heart, killing him. Joab buries Absalom unceremoniously in the woods. Joab then sends a messenger to David to inform him of the death of his son Absalom.

II Samuel 18:28-33

When we are wronged by others or when we see wrongs done in the world to people that are important to us, there are a couple of different ways that we can respond to this injustice. We can respond like Absalom. When his sister Tamar was raped by his brother and his father David did nothing about it, Absalom became driven by revenge. This revenge, which is really self-righteousness disguised as revenge, led to lots and lots and lots of violence.

Absalom's revenge against his sister's rape led him to manipulate others into joining his army. Absalom's anger against his father led him to rape 10 women. Absalom's anger against his father led to the death of 20,000 men. Absalom's anger against his father led to his own death. And Absalom's death led to the anguish of his father David over this broken relationship.

So one way to respond to injustice against you and against someone you care about is to seek revenge against the other. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. You caused me pain so I am going to cause you pain. You said something bad about me so I am going to say something bad about you. You harmed me so I am going to harm you. And while we carry out our revenge against the other many times lots of innocent people suffer.

But that is not the only way to respond to injustice in the world. Paul in his letter to the church in Ephesus was writing to people that thought that Absalom's way was the only way to respond to injustice. But Paul gives them a different way to respond to injustice.

Read Ephesians 4:25-5:2

A few weeks ago Kathryn and I were able to visit Richmond, Virginia. One of the places we visited was the St. Paul's Episcopal Church in downtown Richmond. In May of 1865, General Robert E. Lee, military leader of the Confederate States of America, surrendered at Appomattox. The following Sunday, as was his custom, he attended worship at the St. Paul's Church.

Like most churches in the South including Allison Creek, there was segregated seating for worship. The former slaves were in the balcony and the whites sat on the ground floor.

At St. Paul's Church, when the Lord's Supper was administered, the white congregation would walk down first to partake of the elements while the black congregation sang hymns. Then the whites would sing while the blacks took communion. On this particular Sunday, however, when the Lord's Supper commenced, two Union soldiers brought a freed slave down the aisle to receive communion. The church fell silent at this brazen protest of their tradition.

Robert E. Lee then made his way down to the front, knelt down beside the freed man, and placed his hands on the man. The pastor then brought communion to both of them. The entire congregation then came forward, white and black, and enjoyed communion together that day and from that day forward.

Our culture encourages us to live out an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. And lashing out against another in some way may provide us some momentary sense of relief but ultimately it does not work in the long run. It didn't work for Absalom and it does not work for us.

I hear people sometimes say that they know better than Jesus and Paul about how to treat people who wrong them. I hear people lift up the "eye for an eye" argument but they want no part of Jesus saying, "but I say if you are slapped on one cheek offer the other."

Ultimately the way we live our life is our decision. We can live a life like Absalom and keep on seeking revenge against those that harm us in some way. Or we can maybe, just maybe, accept that Paul and Jesus know what they are talking about with this whole forgiveness thing.

We in South Carolina have been given a pretty good model by some family members in Charleston who watched 9 of their relatives and their pastor gunned down by a stranger who targeted them because of their race. They seemed to believe in the words of Jesus more than the actions of Absalom. Their actions have made a big impact in our nation even while they grieve their loved ones.

So whose way is more faithful? Are we driven by rage and revenge like Absalom?

Or are we driven by forgiveness and reconciliation like Paul and Jesus?

The choice is ours as to which of these ways we choose to follow. AMEN.

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-Reeder, Harry L, *The Embers to a Flame: How God Can Revitalize Your Church*, P&R Publishing, New Jersey, p.166-7

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