

God's Not Asking You To Be "Nice"  
II Samuel 9:1-13, Luke 14:12-14  
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights  
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Pastor Dave Carver

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<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/sermon05-07-2017.mp3>

I'm excited to continue our exploration of David and his story, because I bet that our reading for today contains one of the best stories you've never heard in scripture.

Besides David, the key protagonist in our narrative is a man named Mephibosheth, and he is the son of David's best friend, Jonathan – which makes him, of course, the grandson of Saul, who had been king prior to David. Go ahead, say it: Mephibosheth. It's important that we learn that name.

We meet Mephibosheth three times in the book of Second Samuel. In chapter four, we're given his "back story". On that horrible day when his grandfather, his father and two of his uncles were killed in a battle against the Philistines, Mephibosheth became an endangered species. People knew that David was hoping for the throne, and the common practice was for the one who wanted power to wipe out all of the males in his rival's family.

So when the word of the death of King Saul and his sons came in to the family compound, a well-meaning nurse grabbed the child and started to flee – thinking that she was saving the boy's life. However, she dropped Mephibosheth, and he broke both ankles. The bones didn't set properly, and Mephibosheth never walked again.

He was hustled off to a town on the east side of the Jordan called Lo-Debar. The name means "no pasture" or



“no communication.” It was an impoverished, remote place – the kind of town where people don’t ask each other questions and everyone is just trying hard to get by.

We don’t know how Mephibosheth was raised, but there is every temptation to believe that he grew up wallowing in self-pity, despair, and cynicism. After all, he had seen the palace... but was brought to maturity in a wasteland, forced to suffer the dual indignities of anonymity and dependence on others. It’s easy to think that day after day he was taught that everything bad that had ever happened to him was David’s fault, and that he grew up resentful and angry.

The events of which you just heard, in II Samuel 9, take place about twenty years later. David has finally been established as king over all of Israel and he has succeeded in securing the nation’s borders and building a capital. Now, he finds that he has the time and the opportunity to reach out to Saul’s family in an effort to keep the promise he’d made to his best friend, Jonathan. He asks his staff whether there are any survivors to be found.

They call one of the long-time palace employees, a man named Ziba, into the room, and he replies “Well, as a matter of fact, there is one guy. He’s a cripple, and he’s been holed up in Dead Man’s Gulch for as long as anyone can remember.”

David asks Ziba a question, and the reply is that the person being sought is worthless. He’s not named. He lives in the middle of nowhere. And he’s not much good to anyone, because he’s disabled. Ziba does everything he can to minimize Mephibosheth’s personhood.



David calls for Mephibosheth to appear before him, and the young man comes before the king cringing with fear.

I want you to pay attention to this: what is the first word that David speaks to this man who is on his knees, eyes averted?

“Mephibosheth!” David speaks his name. David acknowledges his worth. Where everything about his upbringing and everyone in his culture would say that he is worthless, David recognizes Mephibosheth’s personhood by using his name.

That’s crucial, because in the next sentence he announces his intention. In our English translation, we hear “I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan.”

This is an unfortunate translation, but it’s understandable. When we use the word “kind” in American culture today, we think it refers to being “nice” or “polite”. If you are “kind” to someone else, it means that you’re showing some momentary generosity of spirit... The other night, I was out on the river and a couple of guys were having some boat problems. I had a couple of spare parts they could use. I handed them off the fellas and then drove away. It was a nice thing to do.

You’re driving in rush hour and all of a sudden a minivan filled with screaming kids and out-of-state plates swerves in front of you just before the Fort Pitt Bridge. You slow down to make space for them. You smile. Because you’re a kind person who does nice things.

Except that’s not what the Bible is talking about here. When David says, “I will show you kindness”, the word that is used is *chesed*. If you look at a variety of translations,

you'll see that people try to express the meaning of this word as "kindness" or "loving-kindness" or "mercy" or "steadfast love" or even "loyalty". It's tricky, because there really is no English equivalent. Those of you who have had the exquisite joy of sitting in my study for six or eight premarital conversations might recall the emphasis that I place on the word "troth", and for my money, that's the best equivalent there is for *chesed* – except that nobody but me really uses the word "troth" in a sentence that frequently. *Chesed*, like troth, conveys elements of love, loyalty, generosity, and faithfulness that are willingly and eagerly extended to one with whom I desire relationship.

That last qualifier is what makes "kindness" or "niceness" poor substitutes: one can only show *chesed* to someone in the context of a relationship. One does not act in *chesed* to a stranger, any more than one pledges one's troth to the person who just sat down next to them on the bus.

*Chesed* is used 240 times in the Old Testament, and it is almost always preceded by a word like "doing" or "keeping" or "showing". It is a word full of integrity and intentionality that bears fruit in concrete ways, and it is one of the central attributes of God. For instance,

Isaiah 54:10: Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my **unfailing love** for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed," says the Lord, who has compassion on you.

Lamentations 3:22-23: Because of the Lord's **great love** we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Or even in Psalm 103, which you've already read this morning as a part of our assurance of pardon: For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his **steadfast love** toward those who fear him...

It is important for us to note that in II Samuel 9, David is choosing to act like God in this context. He says that he wants to show and to keep *chesed* with Mephibosheth and his family. He lives that out by restoring to him his grandfather's land, which guarantees this family an income and an inheritance. Furthermore, he elevates this formerly anonymous non-person to a place of prestige by insisting that Mephibosheth eat at the king's table. Can you imagine the difference between dinnertime in Lo-Debar and the feasting of the royal table in Jerusalem?

David is referred to in the Bible as "a man after God's own heart", and I think that today's reading is a great example of that. He is seeking out someone who has been pushed to the fringes of society and choosing to engage with him with a generosity of spirit and a steadfastness of purpose that brings healing and hope in the context of an intentional, ongoing relationship.

The third time we see Mephibosheth mentioned in II Samuel, it's under very different circumstances. It takes place about ten or fifteen years after this meeting and presumably, Mephibosheth and David have been present to each other for all these years. David's son, Absalom, is intent on seizing the kingdom and so he starts an insurrection. Everyone in Jerusalem has to decide: whose side are you on? David's? Or Absalom's?

The rebellion intensifies so much that David is forced to flee the capital. As he's running out of the city, he encounters Ziba, the man who's been charged to care for Mephibosheth's affairs. They greet each other, and Ziba assures David of his loyalty. David asks where Mephibosheth is, and Ziba throws his master under the bus, saying that Mephibosheth has always hated David and that he's stayed behind in Jerusalem in the

hopes that David's reign will collapse and Mephibosheth can become king.

David is, understandably, irked by this revelation, and so he gives Ziba all of Mephibosheth's property on the spot.

Absalom's rebellion ends with his death, and David returns to the city having won a military victory, but having lost a son, and a great deal more. He's wrapped in grief and regret. When he gets to the palace, he discovers that Mephibosheth is there to greet him – and Mephibosheth is in mourning – he's unshaven, he hasn't bathed or changed his clothes – he's a mess... but he's so happy to see David! Mephibosheth manages to convince David that Ziba was lying, but the best that David can come up with in this time of grief and crisis is, "You know what? You guys work it out. Divide the property between yourselves."

At this point, Mephibosheth responds by blurting out, "Property? Shoot – he can take the whole place! I'm so happy that you're all right. That's what really matters to me!"

The *chesed* with which David treated Mephibosheth over the years had come to bear fruit. The fearful, angry, resentful anonymous man who had grown up in Lo-Debar was now a friend who sought to treat David with the same *chesed* he himself had received. Mephibosheth has totally left the bitterness and self-pity of Lo-Debar and embraced David with the embrace that he himself received. The community has been substantively changed because of this relationship of *chesed*.

So what?

I mean, really, it is a great story – but what does it mean for us today?

We are made in the image of God. We are made to be like God. It's not only David who is called to act as a person who is "after God's own heart".

Yes, you say. We get that, you say.

But too often, we think that acting like God means being "nice". We think that being good Christians means being bland, polite, people who aren't interested in making waves of disturbing anything.

But take a look at David. Consider Jesus of Nazareth, or those who followed him. The day that Jesus died, there was *nobody* who stood at the foot of the cross and said, "Now, you know what? That's a real shame. I mean, this Jesus was a *nice guy*."

When Peter or Paul or any of the rest of that crew blew into town and started preaching the Gospel and showing the love of Christ, nobody's first thought was how well-mannered and polite these nice young religious boys were.

These people who were sold out to the heart of God and passionate about the love of Christ reached out to real people, dealt with real problems, and showed real love. They moved in *chesed*.

As should we.

For some of us, that means that it's time for us to get up and move out of Lo-Debar. We've suffered greatly, perhaps as a result of someone's intentional action or perhaps as a result of some unfortunate accident... but in either case it's left us angry and bitter and living in the place of desolation... and it's killing us. Some of us are called to open ourselves to the God who is

reaching toward us in *chesed* and accept the truth that new beginnings are possible and healing of our damaged selves is the divine intent.

And all of us are called to live our lives in such a way so that there are fewer “nobodies” in our lives. We are called to learn people’s stories and to speak people’s names. You can see that in so many ways here. After worship, in fact, a group of people called the “connectors” will meet. Their goal is to make sure that people in this community are remembered. On the front of the bulletin every week we are told that one of the main purposes of this congregation is “to share life’s joys and sorrows.” The Connectors try to make sure that we don't do that in the abstract, but that we know the stories of the people we sit next to each week.

We saw it again on Monday evening. A group of young people took a big fat check down to the Presbytery to be used for famine relief. But here’s the deal. Those kids are not interested in “feeding the hungry”. They are committed to sharing their resources and themselves with their partners in faith and their brothers and sisters in Malawi and South Sudan. They want to act in *chesed* towards those with whom we are connected by a vibrant relationship. We know each other’s names. We’ve eaten at each other’s tables.

I’ll be honest with you – if you want to follow Jesus, being nice helps.

But you *can’t* do it without a willingness to enter into real (and sometimes messy) relationships with real (and sometimes irritating) people who are in all sorts of different places. The challenge for you, people of God, is to spend some time learning their names, hearing their stories, and showing them the *chesed* in which you yourself have walked. Thanks be to God. Amen.