

Deal Gently
June 25, 2017
II Samuel 18:1-18, John 13:34-35
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
Pastor Dave Carver

To hear this sermon as preached in worship, please visit
https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2017/06/scene1_2017-06-25_10-24-25_t001_in1.mp3

Do you remember being in a place or time where you saw something happening that you thought was just terrible, but you felt as though you were powerless to stop it because you were too young, or too recently hired, or too inexperienced, or something similar? Maybe you were playing in a youth ball game and the coach totally belittled a player who'd made an error, and you thought, "When I get to be coach, I'll *never* do that!" It could be that you watched your parents relate (or fail to relate) with each other and you made a vow that if you ever got married, things would be different in *your* house. Or maybe you had just been hired and your supervisor threw you under the bus at the budget meeting, causing you to vow, "When I'm in charge, this will not happen!" Does anyone remember something like that? More to my point, can you think of something you do now, consciously, as a result of such an experience?



¹I'm asking because as we return to our year-long study of King David, I'm pretty sure that the events of this part of the story are framed by David's experiences as a young man. Perhaps you'll recall back in October, when we listened to the part of the story that took place prior to David's installation as king of Israel. He was living with Saul, the acknowledged king, and more than anything, Saul wanted his son, Jonathan, to be king after him. Jonathan and David were best friends – like brothers, really – and while Jonathan could see God's hand of blessing on David, and the future of a Davidic kingship, Saul was blinded with rage. In fact,

¹ "Saul Wishes to Slay Jonathan" from Maciejowski Bible (12th C)

not only did Saul repeatedly try to murder David so as to ensure that Jonathan would succeed him, when he thought that Jonathan was helping David he actually tried to kill his own son, too. I can only imagine a young David thinking to himself, “If and when I make it to the throne, I will *never, ever* treat my son like that...” Those experiences had to have left some vivid scars on David!



²The last time we heard from this story, David’s oldest son, Amnon, had been killed by his younger brother, Absalom. Following that, Absalom fled the country and even when he returned after three years, his father wouldn’t speak to him for two more years. David is apparently overwhelmed with depression or lethargy or something, and Absalom decides that he’d really like to be king – even if the office isn’t vacant yet. The prince wins the support of the military and many of the people of Israel, and then declares war on his father. Absalom has the advantage of numbers, perhaps, but David is more experienced and has a much better network and strategy.

II Samuel chapters 15 – 17 describe the lead-up to the battle that everyone knows is coming, and so it seems a little anticlimactic when the entire conflict is summarized in two verses you heard earlier – David and his men put down the rebellion.

What strikes me about today’s reading, however, is the conversation that David has with his key leaders on the eve of the battle. He proposes one strategy, and they make a counter-proposal that he humbly accepts. Then he issues a direct order: “Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.”

David has thousands of men assembled to go out and protect him from this son who is trying to kill him... and he says, “Deal gently...” David remembers a father who sought to slay his own son, and he wants no part of this – no matter what Absalom has done. One translator renders this verse as “For my sake, be

² *Absalom Leaves David To Start a Conspiracy*, from Maciejowski Bible (12th C)

sure that Absalom comes back unharmed.” (CEV) Let’s unpack this phrase and consider some of its implications for us today.

The first imperative is, of course, “deal”. Absalom has created a huge problem, and that problem has got to be dealt with. David is unwilling to simply roll over and pretend that he’s not king anymore. Absalom has made a serious threat to David and the entire nation, and that has got to be named, taken seriously, and resolved.

But there’s an adverb – a word that is used to express the means by which the imperative is to be carried out. By all means, deal with the situation – but do so *gently*. Do not be harsh or cruel to the young man...

And the order ends with what the grammarians call a “subordinate clause”. The dealing that needs to be done, and the gentleness in which it is hoped to occur, are to be carried out “for my sake”. Of course, David recognizes that Absalom is dead wrong here. But David hopes that the breach is not beyond repair. “Don’t give Absalom what he deserves”, the king says. “For my sake, treat him better than that...”

So what can we learn from this for our own lives today?

Well, again, let’s start at the top. Deal. You and I encounter a host of issues in our lives every day. Most of them, thankfully, don’t rise to the level of having one of our children try to kill us in cold blood, but each of us faces challenges, slights, wounds, and attacks from others. Many of these are not significant enough to bother with – and you can walk away and let them roll off your back without causing anyone any damage.

But, beloved, you know that there are some attacks, some

offenses that have wounded and continue to grieve you. If you pretend otherwise, you are simply allowing an open sore to fester and become infected with resentment and perhaps lead to a greater disaster in the days ahead. After all, David sought to ignore the difficulty with Absalom for years – and found that his son’s resentment grew every day.

Look at your life, look at your situations, and seek to discern what it is that you need to deal with. What is there that is happening to you or around you (or maybe because of you) that cannot be excused or ignored and must, instead, be named and dealt with. If you are being mistreated by a colleague at work, or in an abusive relationship, or otherwise being marginalized or diminished, it may be time for you to come up with a plan to address and improve this situation.

When you see that, make sure that your plan for correction includes humility. Deal – but deal *gently*. How can you move towards healing and changed relationship in a way that doesn’t do violence to someone else? Not long ago, I had to ask a friend to write a letter to a pastoral colleague in another state. The reason I had to do this was because many years ago, an issue developed between the two of us. I was quick to name the issue, and I spoke truth to the person who was in the wrong. But listen to me, people of God: even though I spoke truth, I did so harshly and clumsily. I wounded my colleague to the extent that she ended our relationship. Because of my arrogance, a friendship was broken unnecessarily.

As you seek to address the situations in your lives with humility and honesty, know that you need to do so for your own sake. Even the boss that is mistreating you, or the spouse who abuses you... if you do not find a way to let go of the pain or resentment, it will become a cancer inside of you that will overwhelm you. You may be

100% correct, and have all the virtues of truth and justice on your side... but if you do not seek to overcome the pain or work through the grief, you will be weighed down forever. Any resentment that you harbor will ferment into toxicity. A few of us were talking not long ago about a quote that is often attributed to Nelson Mandela: “Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping that it will kill your enemies.” No matter who was at fault, no matter where the blame lay – if you cannot find some way to deal with it, pain and bitterness will eventually consume you.



³Deal gently...for your own sake. That sounds pretty easy. Six little words. But how do you do that when the problem is as big as an abusive relationship or an addiction that is sucking the life from an entire family? How do you do that when you are filled with shame or depression or fear?

We can take another lesson from David here. In the chapters leading up to our reading from II Samuel, there is an account of the ways that David and Absalom prepared for this clash.

Absalom was hungry for power; he told people what they wanted to hear, and he surrounded himself with those who did the same for him. He made as though he was going to worship the Lord, but he did so only as a ruse – for Absalom, faith, humility, and integrity were foreign concepts. Life was a show, and as long as the spotlight was on Absalom, things were good.

We’ve talked enough about David to know that he, the people of Israel, and anyone else knew that he wasn’t perfect by any stretch. He was deeply flawed; he both gave and received significant pain. Yet on this occasion, David sought to surround himself with people

³ *David and Absalom*, Marc Chagall (1956)

he knew and trusted were committed not only to him, but to the Lord. Some of these people had been with him for years, and he'd trusted them with his life on many occasions – men like Joab and Abishai. But others were newcomers who had impressed him with their faithfulness and wisdom. In fact, the third commander that David entrusted on this day was Ittai, a Philistine man who had only been in town for a couple of days – but David recognized that he had gifts and wisdom that would help the nation. And when these three men heard David's plan, they helped him to see the flaws in it and he allowed them to re-shape the strategy that wound up allowing his monarchy to survive despite being desperately outnumbered.

Beloved, are you surrounded by trustworthy companions who will help you do what you need to do? Are you humble enough to hear the thoughtful encouragement and good counsel of others? Is there someone in your life who can tell you not just what you want to hear, but the truth?

Moreover, is there someone who will walk with you into the difficult places when you're not sure you can get there on your own? If you are trapped in an abusive relationship, who will help you be strong enough to leave it? Who loves you enough to not only tell you the truth about the damage that addiction is doing in your family or circle of friends, but to go with you to an AA or Al-Anon meeting? Is there someone who will care enough for you to sit with you in the midst of your depression or anger and then not leave you there all alone?

The story of Absalom's rebellion does not end well for anyone, really. Absalom is caught up in his own scheming and pride, and eventually Joab runs him through without blinking an eye; David was restored to the palace in Jerusalem, and sought to make peace with those who had rebelled – even issuing a general amnesty. It was a

painful time, and we'll talk more about that in weeks to come. For now, I want to emphasize the fact that each of us have situations in our personal and professional lives that need to be dealt with and addressed with gentleness and humility so that they will not overwhelm the things that God is trying to accomplish in and through us. We seek out good counsel from old and new friends and hope to find a way to live into that which is best.

Jesus showed us how to do this. On the night that he was arrested, he watched his friend Judas get up from the table and embark on his traitorous mission. And then he looked his followers square in the eyes and said, "Listen: the only way we're going to get anything done is if you love each other the way that I love you. The only way any of this is going to make sense to anyone else is if you can put aside all of your fears and failures and give yourselves fully to each other and to the work I've put before you. Love each other."

At the end of the day, Absalom lay dead and the old king's heart was nearly broken. David cried out, "Oh Absalom, my son! If only I had died instead of you... my son... my son." As Frederick Buechner points out, David meant every word of that. "If he could have done the boy's dying for him, he would have done it. If he could have paid the price for the boy's betrayal of him, he would have paid it. If he could have given his own life to make the boy alive again, he would have given it. But even a king can't do things like that. As later history was to prove, it takes a God."⁴

In David's love for both his people and his son, we see something of God's love for us and for our world. Let us learn from that love, and let us share that love in the days we've been given. Thanks be to God! Amen.

⁴ *Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who* (Harper & Row, 1979), p. 6