

Date: August 9, 2009

Title: After God's Own Heart

The scripture I am about to share with you comes from the narrative of King David's life found in the Old Testament in the book of second Samuel.

1Samuel is all about how the first King of Israel, Saul was chosen and then 2Samuel picks up the story just as Saul and his son Jonathon are reported killed in battle. The prophet Samuel has already anointed David to be the next king over Israel and in 1Samuel 13:14 God describes David as "a man after His own heart."

Both of these books chronicle an extremely violent story of the power struggle between various factions of this young Hebrew Nation. We are going to pick up the story here toward one such conflict between King David and his 3rd Son Absalom. Absalom had managed to convince most of the Hebrew people that he should be the king of Israel instead of his father, David. Forces loyal to David have just managed to take back the kingdom from Absalom, and in the process the traitorous son is killed. The following scripture is David's reaction:

Scripture: 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33

2 Samuel 18:5-9 (NLT) ⁵ And the king gave this command to Joab, Abishai, and Ittai: "For my sake, deal gently with young Absalom." And all the troops heard the king give this order to his commanders. ⁶ So the battle began in the forest of Ephraim, ⁷ and the Israelite troops were beaten back by David's men. There was a great slaughter that day, and 20,000 men laid down their lives. ⁸ The battle raged all across the countryside, and more men died because of the forest than were killed by the sword. ⁹ During the battle, Absalom happened to come upon some of David's men. He tried to escape on his mule, but as he rode beneath the thick branches of a great tree, his hair got caught in the tree. His mule kept going and left him dangling in the air.

2 Samuel 18:15 (NLT) Ten of Joab's young armor bearers then surrounded Absalom and killed him.

2 Samuel 18:31-33 (NLT) ³¹ Then the man from Ethiopia arrived and said, "I have good news for my lord the king. Today the Lord has rescued you

from all those who rebelled against you.”³² “What about young Absalom?” the king demanded. “Is he all right?” And the Ethiopian replied, “May all of your enemies, my lord the king, both now and in the future, share the fate of that young man!”³³ The king was overcome with emotion. He went up to the room over the gateway and burst into tears. And as he went, he cried, “O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you! O Absalom, my son, my son.”

Now, I have to admit that when I first considered this scripture for a sermon, my first thought was to move on to something else. But there was something that caught my attention and so decided to explore it a little further. So as we proceed I want to give a little background information.

First, we have to realize that King David has hero status in the Hebrew/Jewish tradition. One reason for this is that the entire Promised Land was united into one grand kingdom under David’s reign. It had been divided for a while under King Saul and would be divided again under later kings, but David united the country. Also, for the majority of David’s reign the Israelites were relatively free from outside threat. They were not being constantly invaded by their archenemy the Philistines. Without the constant threat of war, the country was prosperous. Perhaps, the most important thing about King David is that he never lost sight of his relationship with God. Many later kings would start their reign submitted to God, but then as things began to go well, they began to turn away from God. David never did this. Which brings me to the last reason David had this legendary status with the Jewish people; David was considered a man after God’s own heart. The way it reads when you look at the Hebrew words it says that because Saul essentially messed up, God went looking for a man after his own heart.

A man after his own heart...

What do you suppose that means? We know that it has to be metaphor because God as we know God, before Jesus didn’t have a body, so He would have no need of literal heart. The word that was used to convey “after God’s own heart” suggests sharing a common vision. David’s essential character was in line with God’s will. I have even heard it said that

to a degree David is sort of like the Hebrew or Jewish Christ figure. The first words of the New Testament are: “This is a record of the ancestors of Jesus the Messiah, son of David” Matt 1:1 (NLT) The Author of Matthew goes to great links to establish that Jesus is related to King David. When Mathew was writing his gospel, none of his Jewish readers would have even given Jesus a second thought had he not been shown to be a descendent of King David.

The point of all of this is that David would almost be considered, on some level, God’s representative on earth; not exactly like Jesus was, not divine, really but certainly connected and in alignment with God. So, with that in mind let’s look this small piece of David’s story and at what it might tell us about God and about how we might be people after God’s own heart.

The first thing I notice is how David feels about his son, Absalom. Absalom has not been a very nice person. He has:

- murdered his stepbrother
- slept with David’s concubines
- led a coup d’état against his own father
- thereby turning most of the country’s loyalty away from David and toward himself,
- and when this story takes place, Absalom is actually waging war on his father who is not only the king, but the anointed one of God. I think it would be safe to label Absalom as a rebellious sinning adult child.

Now, I would be willing to bet that none of you have even come close to committing sins that compare with Absalom. He just did some really nasty things. So, it might be sort of tough for us to try to see any comparison between ourselves and this rebellious son of David. But, while we may not have done what he did, I would guess that most of us have shown some rebellion against our earthly father at some time or other, and I would be willing to bet that every one of us has rebelled against our Heavenly Father more than once in our lives. If you are like me – lots of times!

And yet, just like David wept for his son; just like David asked his soldiers to be merciful with his son; I believe that God is like that with us. When I think of all the times in my own life when I turned my back on God and went my own way, I have to marvel at God’s never-ending Grace and mercy.

Have you ever heard of the two definitions of grace and mercy? Grace is a gift from God that we don't deserve. Mercy is what we get from God instead of what we deserve.

In our scripture, David never stops loving his son. After reading of the many sins committed directly against David, one could certainly conclude that Absalom was not worthy of the love that his father maintained for him. So, since Absalom didn't deserve the love that David had for his sinning son, I think we can call David's love *merciful love*. The consequences of Absalom's actions lead ultimately to his death, but we get the impression that there is nothing this wayward son could have done to destroy the love his father had for him. None of his sins, no matter how horrible led to his father's hatred or rejection.

David's mercy is unfailing, and I believe this is much like the mercy our Heavenly Father extends to us. I get the feeling that right up until he received word that his son had been killed, David held out hope that he might be able to reconcile with Absalom. I believe that this is the same hope that our heavenly father holds out for us. No matter what we have done or no matter how many times we have rejected God or sinned against God, we can rest assured that God is always ready to take us back into the fold.

I think this is a hard concept to grapple with because for the most part we are really good at making judgments. You are probably not as adept at it as I am, but let me tell you I have found that I am especially good at passing judgment on the actions of others; especially when I am tired or stressed-out.

I remember one time when I was driving south on Academy Boulevard during some pretty busy traffic. I was in a bit of a hurry and needed to change lanes so I could make a left turn that was coming up soon. I put my blinker on and looked back to make sure the lady behind and to my left was going to let me come over but instead of smiling and holding back, she stepped on the gas and came up right beside me making it impossible for me to get into the left lane. A wave of anger flashed over me and I was incensed that she could be so inconsiderate of another human being. I don't think I called her any bad names or made any rude gestures but I was literally hollering at her as we drove down the street side by side. I was the judge in that moment and that woman was evil. She deserved to be

punished for her inconsideration; she should not be allowed to drive on the same streets as normal people; and... if for some reason a person plowed into the side of her car when she was acting so badly it would serve her right. At that particular moment in my life I was not very close to the merciful spirit of King David. I did not see this lady as a fellow child of God but as someone akin to the antichrist. I knew this because I was the judge!

Now, any number of things might have explained her behavior; things that I was not aware of, but at that particular moment in time I was very definitely the judge, and jury and there wasn't a merciful bone in my body. I was a far cry from King David and a far cry from God who consistently forgives and offers mercy to me. I must confess that in my humanness, I am far too quick to judge and mercy is often the last thing on my mind.

And so when I read about King David and how his love for his son never stopped and even though we might say he had every right to hate his son and to disown him. And I realize how I have given my heavenly father many opportunities to disown me, it makes me want to try just a little harder to show mercy even when mercy is that last thing I want to show. It makes me want to trust that God has a way of making all of these things I don't understand to work out for the good. And it makes me want to see if perhaps I can't do just a little more to be a man after God's own heart. I can't do it by myself. I'm just not good enough for that, but with a little bit of desire and the help of the Holy Spirit, I truly believe that anyone can do it.

We don't have to be perfect. I'm certainly not perfect; David was not perfect; you probably would say that you are not perfect either, but it seems to me that it's not perfection that God wants. What I believe God wants is for us to want to live our lives and serve Him in a way that reflects God's love and light. And if we attempt to live our lives focused on God and what God wants for us and what God wants for our brothers and sisters, I suspect that God might even say about us, "you know there is that Tom; he's a man after my own heart." Or "There's Nancy; she's a woman after my own heart."

You may be sitting there thinking, "God could never say that about me", but you never know; with a little bit of effort and some help from the Holy Spirit, you might be surprised. You just might be surprised. Amen.