

How the Mighty Have Fallen
Reading from the Old Testament: 2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

A popular meme that has circulated for some time says, “Some people want the perfect relationship. I just want a cheeseburger that looks like the ones in the commercials.” Being human means that perfection and relationship seldom reside in the same zip code. It’s simple math, really: desire for relationship + expectations of relationship = complication. Kafka said it well when he lamented, “You are at once both the quiet and the confusion of my heart.” Or perhaps, it is best summed up in the title of the Broadway Musical: *I Love You, You’re Perfect, Now Change*.

Fathers and sons, sons and mothers, mothers and daughters, daughters and fathers, fathers and mothers, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, Montague vs. Capulet, office politics, partisanship at the Thanksgiving table, the *can’t we just be friends* speech, the Eddie Haskel/Wally Cleaver friendships, the *Mean Girl* love/hate jealousies, the on-again/off-again status of speaking terms, the sibling rivalries, the complexities of international detente – It’s complicated, isn’t it? Or, maybe fraught is a better adjective for the sum of your relationships –

fraught with anxiety; fraught with jealousy, joy, fear, fun, love, lust, and loathing. Relationships are like weather forecasts: clear to partly cloudy with a 90% chance of scattered thunderstorms plus a tornado watch. Of course, the complexities of relationships are often best revealed in the lines of a country song: *How Can I Miss You When You Won't Go Away; I Keep Forgetting That I Forgot About You; If I Can't Be Number One in Your Life, Then Number Two on You; If You Don't Leave Me Alone, I'll Go Find Someone Else Who Will.*

Fraught would definitely be the adjective to describe the relationship between Saul, the artist formerly known as *the Lord's Anointed*, and David, Saul's replacement as *the Lord's Anointed*. When we last saw them together Saul was helping David try on his personal armor for size, leaving David looking like me if I tried on LeBron James' suit. Casting it off, David went out and summarily slayed Goliath on Saul's behalf.

Now, this is odd – after slaying Goliath, Saul inquires about the identity of David as if he was a stranger, but this is the same David Saul had welcomed into his house because David's musical gift had a way of soothing Saul's troubled spirit. And it was Saul who had given

David the go ahead to face Goliath, but post-Goliath, David is suddenly unfamiliar to Saul? Hmmmm.

Well, the curious just gets *curious(er)* as the triumphant Israelites return following their victory over the Philistines. The people come out to greet the victors with an exultant song. “Saul has killed his thousands and David his ten thousands.” Don’t you know that went over well with King Saul? The text says, “Saul was very angry, for this saying displeased him. He said, “They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands; what more can he have but the kingdom?” So Saul eyed David from that day on.” In fact the next day, Saul goes all wackadoodle and tries to kill David with a spear, not once but twice.

Okay, but just after that Saul makes David the battalion commander of a thousand infantry, and we read, “David had success in all his undertakings; for the Lord was with him. When Saul saw that he had great success, he stood in awe of him.” So, now what does Saul do? Why, he’s the father of the bride, having arranged the marriage of David to his daughter Michal, which means that in addition to his bromance with Saul’s son, Jonathan, David is now Saul’s son-in-law,

and if son-in-law is a role that makes you uncomfortable, maybe this is why. Possibly before they even have the chance to cut the wedding cake, the text says, “when Saul realized that the Lord was with David, and that Saul's daughter Michal loved him, Saul was still more afraid of David. So Saul was David's enemy from that time forward.”

Saul’s constant mood swings leave David all twisted in knots. David is out there fighting the Philistines on Saul’s behalf one moment and seeking asylum from Saul with the Philistines the next. So, in a curious turn of events we have David fighting against the Amalekites, who are enemies of the Philistines; and we have Saul fighting against the Philistines. It’s either an episode of *Survivor* or a day in Washington D.C.; and maybe there are times when it resembles a day in your life.

So, if you were to look up the relationship status on Saul or David’s facebook page, I’m guessing the appropriate adjective would be *fraught*, fraught with anxiety, fear, love, loathing, respect, paranoia, and jealousy.

Well, David puts a whuppin’ on the Amalekites on behalf of the Philistines while the Philistines are simultaneously pummeling the

Israelites resulting in the death of both Saul and Jonathan. It was a good day to be a Philistine; and one would assume David would be feeling a sense of relief knowing that he won't have to dodge Saul's spear anymore. The path to Israel's throne was suddenly looking pretty clear to boot. The king is dead. Long live the king! Is the coronation chorus tuning up?

We are a *next*-obsessed culture. The 24/7 traffic jam of talking heads opinionating on next week's dirty laundry; the passive/aggressive facebook posts in the middle of the night; the inability to drive to the corner without checking the smartphone 5 times; the kid in the backseat changing from the swimsuit to the soccer jersey while practicing the cello – *NOW* is always losing out to *NEXT*. Yet, that's not what happens here when David learns of the death of Saul, the tormentor mentor, and Jonathan, his best friend. And in David's response there is a powerful lesson for us about dignity, honor, grace, mercy, and grief.

How the mighty have fallen. That's the memorable line excised from this text on occasions of defeat and noteworthy falls from grace. Nixon, Cosby, Edwards, OJ, Weinstein, Charles I, Marie Antionette

Tonya, Huey Long, Mary Queen of Scots – the columns and commentaries wax poetic on the fragility of power and celebrity. *How the mighty have fallen*. The armor cracks. The pedestal crumbles. Turn out the lights, the party's over. *How the mighty have fallen*. However, that is the opposite of the spirit intended in David's lament that we read today. Sure, David would have reason to gloat, to dismiss Saul's legacy, to demean Saul's character. But that is not what happens here.

The loss of Saul and Jonathan is nobly and honestly grieved here by David. Walter Brueggemann calls this “a pathos filled personal statement that is at the same time a magisterial statement of public reality.” He says, “When Israel witnesses David in his grief, it sees David in his fullest, most faithful, powerful form.” It is this aspect of David's character that will not relegate him to the crowded closet of Israel's iniquitous kings. While we will discover that David is a deeply flawed individual, we see here in David an integrity that refuses to seize the moment for the sake of politics and power. This is not the product of a communications office striving to transform tragedy into a political opportunity, a sound byte for the pollsters. This is not the superficial and saccharine tribute of a rival seeking the spotlight.

“Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely! In life and in death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. O daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you with crimson, in luxury, who put ornaments of gold on your apparel. How the mighty have fallen in the midst of the battle! Jonathan lies slain upon your high places. I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan; greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.”

David hits the pause button on any resentments, on any talk of what comes next or what may now come to him. Brueggemann says, “We are characteristically so busy with power, so bent on continuity, so mesmerized by our ideologies of control that we will not entertain a hiatus in our control of life to allow for grief.” But here, David is seeking no political advantage, no momentum for a movement. Rather, David, in spite of the complexities that defined their relationships, honors two individuals who had a profound impact on his life and who would continue to influence the character of a nation and its king and its covenant. “From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan did not turn back, nor the sword of Saul return empty.”

Those are poignant words coming from the lips of one who was often the target of Saul's sword. There is a dignity in this episode that is missing in today's caustic, winner-take-all, humiliate-the-rival culture that refuses to take a breath. Malevolence is malignant in our land. Complex issues are erroneously reduced to these destructive binary, choose your team, demean your rival stances. It is telling when you can no longer distinguish the news programs from the theater of *Wrestlemania*. The state of public discourse today leads me to empathy for "Mean Gene" Okerlund, (admit if you know who that is) the poor guy holding the microphone for the likes of Ric Flair and Hulk Hogan and their saliva spewing, maniacal rants. Will this be remembered as the age of incivility, the era of impertinence?

In his letter to the Roman church, Paul strings together a number of verses from the Psalms and the Prophets to warn the people about what legacy they will leave if they remain so cold and calculating toward those who are different from them. "There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even

one.” “Their throats are opened graves; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of vipers is under their lips.” “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.” “Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery are in their paths, 17 and the way of peace they have not known.” 18 “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

The capacity for perceiving the nuances of character is in decline and truth becomes disposable in the mad dash to win at all costs. If a life cannot be defined in one photo, neither can it be defined by one flaw, one event, one mistake, one sin, one encounter, or one opinion. No one can so easily be boxed up, for every life is a pot of stone soup: a little bit of this; a little bit of that; and countless other ingredients and spices tossed in. Far too often, we draw conclusions about others as if we are reading the ingredients on the soup can without our glasses. The wisdom of Ecclesiastes is instructive. “16 Do not be too righteous, and do not act too wise; why should you destroy yourself? ... 20 Surely there is no one on earth so righteous as to do good without ever sinning. 21 Do not give heed to everything that people say, or you may hear your servant cursing you; 22 your heart knows that many times you have yourself cursed others.”

Yes, David was deeply flawed, but we will discover in David the capacity for self-reflection and the willingness to look beyond the offenses, battles, and wounds to perceive the light of God's grace in a rival. At the death of Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, people were amazed to hear of his abiding friendship with Ruth Bader Ginsburg. These two justices passionately disagreed with one another on about every hot-button issue before the court. And yet, there was a deep mutual respect and collegial love for one another because of their willingness to see the whole person and not just the vote. "They and their families spent New Year's Eve together every year. They rode together on an elephant in India ... and Scalia watched Ginsburg go parasailing in the south of France (Scalia said, "She's so light, you would think she would never come down. I would not do that")." There was even an opera written about their friendship, *Scalia/Ginsburg, A (Gentle Parody) of Operatic Proportions*. And at Scalia's death Ginsburg penned a moving tribute to her friend including this observation: He was a jurist of captivating brilliance and wit, with a rare talent to make even the most sober judge laugh." (Justice Ginsburg as quoted by Dara Lind, *Vox*)

The legacy of a life defined by enemies is loneliness. Knowing this, the Apostle Paul advised, Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.” That is the legacy David leaves us in his lament for Saul and Jonathan. What legacy will you leave?