

LOVE MIXES THINGS UP

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The Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
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2 Samuel 15:1-12; 18:1, 6-15; 2 Samuel 18:16-19:7

Text: "[F]or I perceive that if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased." -- 2 Samuel 19:6b

"[F]or I perceive that if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased."

That's Joab, the commander of David's armies, essentially telling his boss off. Joab is telling David to straighten up and fly right. Joab is scolding the king of Israel because that king has allowed his love for his son to so becloud his judgment that he is in serious danger of losing the support of his most loyal subjects and, with it, the kingdom he has worked his entire life to create and maintain. David's priorities are all out of whack, and his feelings and his thoughts are all mixed up, because that's what love, genuine love, does to a person: love mixes things up.

Now I know that we don't want love to do that. We want love to sort things out for us. Isn't that the message I hammer into you, week after week, when I remind you that the two greatest commandments are to love God above all else and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves? Isn't that love sorting things out? If we could do just those two things – love God first and love our neighbor as we love ourselves – wouldn't that sort out our lives and our world?

Would that it would. We would like for love to work that way, but I'm not at all convinced that it actually does. In my experience and observation, love has a tendency to mix things up as often as it sorts things out, and I say that in part because of today's reading.

If any of you were wondering why I got a doctorate in Old Testament rather than New, look no further than today's lesson. The story of David is one of the masterpieces of world literature, leaving aside entirely its status as divinely inspired scripture. One of my perennial frustrations as a pastor is that Sunday morning leaves us so little time to read many of the biblical narratives in their full, literary integrity, and today's reading is a perfect example. If we'd had time this morning, we would have read much more of the story of Absalom's rebellion against his father, a story that takes up several chapters in the book of 2 Samuel. But Ken and I read enough, I hope, for you to grasp some sense of the problem captured in Joab's rebuke of David: love mixes things up.

And if any figure in the Bible knew something about love, it was David. David was, above all else, a great lover. He loved passionately, deeply, widely, and loyally, and his life was, largely as a result of all that loving, a terrific mess. An heroic mess -- "biblical" as the chattering classes like to say today of something really, really big -- a mess literally of epic proportions. If you ever want to read an unflinching examination of human nature, a story loaded with sex and violence, along with a great deal of lust, betrayal, sin, punishment and oceans of tears, then read the story of David in 1 and 2 Samuel. It'll take you about an afternoon -- which starts roughly two hours from now.

And if you do, you will discover that this story of a very messy life is, in its broadest outline, a love story: love of God, love of country, love of family, love of friends, love of comrades-in-arms, even love of one's enemies. The story of David is preeminently a story about all the ways a man of outsize personality can love, so we shouldn't be too surprised that its edges aren't clean.

The edges of all genuine love stories are never clean. Whether it's Romeo and Juliet or Tony and Maria on the West Side – of Manhattan, not Cleveland -- or Helen and Paris or Achilles and Patroclus or Alexander and Hephaestion or Antony and Cleopatra, or Heloise and Abelard, or Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan being sleepless in Seattle – where love draws people together, it always mixes things up.

And the mixing up isn't always smooth. Where formerly there were two bank accounts, there's now one, with joint ownership and joint spending and joint accountability, and it takes time for people to figure out how to make the transition from personal finances to household management. And we know that money is one of the top sources of conflict in a marriage. Having yours and having mine would be easier, but it wouldn't be ours, and love draws people together to create ours, so we struggle through the messiness. Love mixes things up.

Which parent here this morning hasn't spent more than one sleepless night worrying about a child's questionable decision? We want our kids to be happy and safe, but we also want them to be able to live as independent adults in a world full of risk, and that means letting them make decisions with which we may not agree and with which we are not always comfortable. You want them to be happy, but you also want them to be free, so you live with that tension and the mixed-up feelings that come with it. Love mixes things up.

And wouldn't life be a whole lot simpler if we could just stop loving when it seems pointless to continue? Many years ago, when I was a divinity student in Connecticut, I conducted the memorial service for a friend in Bloomington, Indiana, who had died of a brain tumor in his mid-forties, leaving behind a young widow, also a friend of mine, and a son who had just started school. A few weeks after the service, I phoned my widowed friend to see how she was coping, and she said something I'll never forget. She said, "Gene, I know intellectually that John's dead, and I can accept that. But the problem, for me, is not that John's dead, but that I can't stop loving him just because he's dead. I wish I would, but I can't, and that's why I'm in such pain." And all I could do was agree with her.

That's the way love works. It mixes things up. Love is no respecter of the boundaries we think should end it. Love is no obedient servant of the thoughts we think should govern it. Love is no compliant tool of the schemes to which we wish to put it. Love is too messy for all of that. Love mixes things up.

I leave you with a confession and a plea. The confession is that what I'm saying to you this morning grew out of not only years of reading the Bible closely and widely, but also out of sometimes painful personal experience. I am, by nature, what the Germans would call "*Regelmaessig*," which means orderly or well-proportioned or put together just so or done the right way. I have a passion for order, for neatness, for organizing. You can walk into my study fifty feet from here and see it immediately. There are piles, but they're neat piles, and there are lots of right angles on my desk and on the walls. Clutter bothers me. Some people, especially artists, look at clutter and see potential and do wonderfully creative things with it. I look at clutter and want to tidy up. I want things to be in their place, so you probably won't be surprised to know that I very nearly became a

librarian.

So when love mixes things up in my life, my first instinct usually isn't positive. I tend, first, to withdraw, and then I try to impose order. I try to straighten things out, as Joab tried to straighten David out; I try to get my priorities back where I think they should be.

But in so doing, I know I am closing myself off from the way love often works. Love is not as tidy as I would like it to be. Love often makes demands of me that leave me confused and frustrated and feeling terribly vulnerable. Love draws me into situations that I often cannot control, and I don't like being out of control.

And I know that many of you are like me, so here's the plea: let go and let God. Let go of the illusion that you are in control. Let go of the fear that if things don't go right, it's your fault. Let go of the false security that comes from a tidy, sequestered existence.

Let go of everything that keeps the disorderly Spirit of God from blowing the papers off the desk of your life. Let the Spirit of God, who is Love, mix your life up a bit. Say yes to wearing purple, even if you don't think purple's your color and even if you're not an old lady. Say yes to going barefoot even if your feet are well past their youthful prime. Say yes to giving to a worthy cause even if you don't know how you'll make up that deficit in your budget.

Let love mix things up in your life, just as God mixed them up in Jesus Christ. For the sake of bringing God's love a little closer to the world, violate a respectable taboo or two, associate with the wrong sort for a while, flaunt some authority, marry the grown-up who wants to marry you, dump the soul-destroying job, engage civilly in some civil disobedience.

Do whatever it takes to keep from getting to the end of your life with nothing to show for it except a handsome headstone. Live a little; not for yourself – which is a **very** little – but for God, for whom and with whom we live a lot. A whole lot. Eternally. Amen.

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