

- 1) *He's the spittin' image of his father! She sure does takes after her mom! You're just a chip off the old block.*
 My friends and I heard phrases like that all the time as we grew up.
 We loved our parents, but we didn't appreciate being told that we were "just like" them.
 We were different! We weren't just clones or carbon copies of our parents!
 Protests like that are natural for children—and healthy.
 Growing up involves "individuation" (as psychologists say):
 sorting out our own identities, and separating them from those of our parents.
 Clinging to parents too closely (or having to cope with "helicopter parents")
 really does get in the way of growing up.

- 2) But the other side of that is that other old adage: *The apple never falls far from the tree.*
 Psychologists have a name for *that* bit of folk wisdom also: Family Systems Theory—
 which says, among other things, that parents leave an imprint on their children—
 something less obvious than the shape of the nose;
 but something more important—a stamp on the soul.
 We are all marked by our parents; and our children are marked by us.
 How could it be otherwise? What a gift that can be—and what a burden.

- 3) For the past 8 weeks, we have been tracing the trajectory of a man named David—
 from shepherd boy, to giant slayer, to guerrilla insurgent, to God-fearing nation-builder,
 to established monarch, to adulterer and murderer, to confessing penitent—
 and now, at last, to a broken old man sobbing uncontrollably at the slaughter of his son.
 How has it come to this?
 No political movement lasts forever. Every administration has an Achilles heel.
 But the ancient tellers of the David story are more interested in something else,
 an explanation captured in one more piece of homespun wisdom: *Like father, like son.*

- 4) Even if you recall last week's episode of the story—Nathan facing down David for adultery and murder—
 Like father, like son isn't immediately evident from what we've heard today:
 the death of David's son—and David reacting not like a king, but like a dad.
 In the 7 days since last Sunday, 11 years have passed in the story of David.
 It is a long story, a sad story, a sordid story, a deeply tragic story.
 It would be too time consuming (and, truth be told, too depressing)
 to trudge our way through every twist and turn of it.
 But these are the essential pieces:

When he confronts David about stealing Bathsheba and bumping off of her husband,
 Nathan predicts four things:

- 1) That "the sword will never depart from David's house,"
- 2) That "trouble will be raised up against him from his own house,"
- 3) That David's wives will be given to his "neighbor,"
 "who will lie with them in the sight of this very sun"
- 4) That this will be done "before all Israel."

We need to note what Nathan *is* and *isn't* saying:

- Nathan's *not* saying that, even though David has repented,
 God's gonna beat up on him anyway, just for the heck of it.
- Nathan *is* saying what any Family Systems Therapist can tell you: that, absent some intervention,
 children tend to replicate the *behavior patterns* of their parents
 even when they are rebelling *against* their parents.

5) So here's the gist of what has come down in the 11 years since the prophesy of Nathan we heard last week.

- David's crown prince, Amnon, falls in lust with Tamar, who's the sister of Absalom—*another* son of David by a different wife.
- Amnon rapes Tamar, then tosses her aside (in spite of her clearly reasoned pleading).
- David is angry, but doesn't do anything (after all, after what he's done to Bathsheba, he is morally compromised).
- Absalom waits 2 years, then tricks David into sending the royal children to a party.
- At the party, Absalom has his half-brother Amnon killed. David can only grieve.
- Absalom flees into exile for 3 years. But after grieving his *murdered* son, David begins to long for his *murdering* son, yet can't bring himself to bring Absalom back.
- Finally influenced by some court intrigue, David permits Absalom back in town, but not back in the court for 2 years more.
- Meanwhile Absalom (a drop dead gorgeous guy with long flowing hair) plots against David, promising people they'd be better off if *he* were king.
- Absalom gets David's permission to make a "religious pilgrimage." Under that false pretence, and out of range, Absalom gets his buddies to proclaim *him* as king.
- David flees Jerusalem with all *his* followers *except* the women in his harem, whom he leaves behind to look after the palace (brave, huh?)
- Absalom returns to Jerusalem, sets himself up in David's palace, and violates David's wives—thus fulfilling Nathan's prophesy.
- But David plants spies and false advisors in Jerusalem. One of them persuades Absalom to adopt a strategy for crushing David—a strategy that plays right into David's hands.
- David's forces win the battle (as we heard today), and Absalom is killed.

You didn't follow every step of that? Well, it's less than half the story!

(I'll reproduce the other pieces on our web site if you want to check it out—or you could do something subversive like read 2 Sam 11-18)

But the point is this—the story teller sweeps us into a swelling tide of events that tumbles totally out of control—but is also totally, tragically predictable.

The end result? The apple has *not* fallen far from the tree.

Absalom *is* a chip off the old block, the spittin' moral image of his dad.

(In a time when the only stories allowed about kings were ones extolling how wonderful they were, *this* storyteller's candor is astonishing.)

6) But *like father, like son—like parent like child* does not have to play out like this.

Gospel writer John portrays a child who is on intimate terms with his heavenly parent.

Who embraces being, as it were, "the spittin' image of his heavenly Father."

And yet who is his own person—fully self-differentiated.

Witness how Jesus takes on first an adoring, and then a grumbling crowd without capitulating to their attempts to make him king, without collapsing under the pressure of their misplaced criticism, but most of all, without writing them off because of their hostility.

Jesus holds out a vision for family connection in which his own relationship to God, while distinctive—even unique—is not exclusive or proprietary:

("I'm the first born here—the rest of you sit at the far end of the table.")

No—Jesus is a well connected child to a healthy divine parent;
and both of them are out to make a place—to shape a space—where all God’s children
can celebrate their connection with the generous generative source of their being.
Listen to Jesus trying to convince the crowd:

Everything that the Father gives to me *will* come to me.
And *anyone* who comes to me I will *never* drive away—
for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.
And *this* is the will of him who sent me—hat I should lose *nothing* of *all* that he has given me.
This is *indeed* the will of my Father—that *all* who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life,

These are not the words of a possessive, dysfunctional child,
parroting the perspective of a possessive, dysfunctional parent.
These are the words of one who is more than happy to own his place right at the root of the Tree of Life.
These are the words of one who is intent on fostering for others the possibility
of recognizing and celebrating their *own* healthy connections with God.

7) *Be imitators of God, as beloved children*, urges the author of the Letter to the Ephesians.
This writer has just laid down for his listeners what sounds like a long laundry list
of behavioral demands that are impossibly idealistic:

Put away from yourselves all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling—
“Just a minute—You don’t know *my* family!” If these are requirements
for admission into *God’s* family, I’ll never make it in a million years!”

But this is not—is not—a set of admission standards the author is ticking off.
These are the pledge of a family inheritance—ready for the claiming, here and now.
You and I are given resources that we do *not* have to work up to,
but that we *do* have to acknowledge and embrace.

The epistle writer has spoken of this rich inheritance again and again in the last few weeks;
Allow his words to sink in one more time:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing . . .
He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ.

In other words, we are made in the spittin’ image of the one who made us.

In him we have redemption . . . according to the riches of his grace that he lavished upon us.

In other words: we take after the God who has blessed us into being.

I pray that God . . . may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him,
so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know
what is the hope to which he has called you,
what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints,
and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe.

In other words: even if we are enmeshed in behavior patterns
that rival those in the family of poor old King David—
we are, as Jesus says, not just *taught* by; but *drawn* by God—
drawn from the dreary predictability of David-like dysfunctional families,
drawn into healthy connection with a totally transforming holy family.

Or to put it one more way: You and I are chips off the old Block—
the oldest Block, the soundest Block, the finest Block. We just don’t come from rotten wood. Thanks be to God!

Notes to accompany this sermon

The lessons read for the service on this Sunday are excerpts from their broader (and essential) context.

The David story, of which we hear the tragic sequel, is far too long (11 chapters) to be read aloud in a single service.

John's telling of the Feeding of the Five Thousand (and the subsequent theological discussion) is also more than a modern audience is conditioned to hear in one setting. It is therefore, divided up over the course of five successive Sundays (which, alas) also breaks up the unfolding narrative. In addition (inexplicably and inexcusably) the lectionary text for this Sunday lops five critical verses out of the middle of the reading.

What follows, therefore, is:

- A rapid reprise of all the major events in the David story, beginning at Nathan's confronting of the king over his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah, and continuing up to the death of his son Absalom, and
- The full text (with my interpretational emphases) of John 6:35-51

The Disintegration of David's Dysfunctional Family (2 Samuel 11-19)

- 1) David sees and takes Bathsheba, and covers up his adultery by having Uriah, her husband, killed.
- 2) Nathan confronts David with a dramatic story about a rich man, a poor man, and the poor man's little lamb which the rich man seizes and slaughters. David recognizes his own story, and repents.
- 3) Nathan promises that God will spare David, but predicts that:
 - "the sword will never depart from David's house,"
 - "trouble will be raised up against him from his own house,"
 - his wives will be given to his "neighbor, who will lie with them in the sight of this very sun,
 - this will be done "before all Israel."
- 4) Amnon (David's crown prince) falls in lust with Tamar (sister to Absalom—another of David's sons by another wife). Amnon fakes illness, tricks David into sending Tamar to feed him, rapes her (in spite of her well reasoned resistance), then loathes her and throws her out (in spite of her well reasoned protest). David is angry, but does nothing (since he is compromised by his own act of adultery).
- 5) Absalom, Tamar's brother, bides his time (2 years), then tricks David into sending all the royal children to a sheep-shearing celebration. At the banquet his servants kill Amnon. David grieves, but does nothing.
- 6) Absalom flees into exile for 3 years. David, having grieved his *murdered* son, now begins to long for his *murdering* son, but cannot bring *himself* to bring Absalom back. Joab, David's general, enlists a "wise woman" to dramatize a parallel parabolic metaphor (not unlike Nathan's) about her own (fictional) plight of having lost both her own murdered, and murdering sons. David promises assistance, then figures out (again) that the story is really about *him*. David relents, and allows Absalom to return to Jerusalem, but does not permit him to return to the court for 2 more years.
- 7) Absalom gets David's general Joab to intercede on his behalf (by setting fire to Joab's field!) David restores Absalom to his court with a formal kiss.
- 8) Absalom (a drop dead gorgeous fellow with long, fast growing hair) begins a plot against David, gaining favor with the people by promising he would be a better arbitrator of disputes than David has recently been.

- 9) Absalom gets David's permission to make a religious pilgrimage—and has his followers proclaim *him* king. David flees Jerusalem with all his followers *except* his harem of concubines, whom he leaves to look after the palace. Absalom sets up shop in David's palace, and makes a show of "taking" David's wives, thus fulfilling Nathan's prophesy.
- 10) One of David's advisors, Ahithophel, joins forces with Absalom. The priests (loyal to David) try to bring along the ark as David retreats. David sends the ark back to Jerusalem, and enlists the priests as spies. Another follower of David, Hushai, asks David's permission to come along with him. David sends Hushai back to become a "mole" in Absalom's court, and to give Absalom false advice. Ahithophel tries to convince Absalom to pursue David quickly while he is still weak. Hushai counters that it would be better to wait and lay plans for a larger siege (which, in effect, allows David the time he needs to recoup.) Absalom takes Hushai's advice; Ahithophel, realizing that Absalom is doomed, commits suicide.
- 11) David sends out his loyal troops to defeat the insurrection, with clear instructions to "deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom."
- 12) Absalom's army is soundly defeated, due in large measure to the terrain features of a heavy forest.
- 13) Absalom's hair is caught in a tree branch. His mule rides off and leaves him "hanging between heaven and earth." Joab and his servants disregard David's advice "for his own good" kill Absalom as he hangs from the tree.
- 14) Joab sends word to David, by two messengers; the first announces victory, the second announces the death of Absalom. David mourns Absalom, but is eventually shamed by into "putting on a good face" for the troops who have fought for his kingdom and for his life.

John 6: 35-51

Very truly I tell you, it *was* not *Moses* who *gave* you the bread of life.
 But it *is my Father* who *gives* you the *true* bread from heaven.
 For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.

They said to him: Sir, give us this bread always.

Jesus said to them:
 I AM the bread of life.
 Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.
 But I said to you that you have *seen* me and yet do *not* believe.

Everything that the Father gives to me *will* come to me.
 And *anyone* who comes to me I will *never* drive away—
 for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.
 And *this* is the will of him who sent me—
 that I should lose *nothing* of *all* that he has given me, but raise it up at the last day.

This is *indeed* the will of my Father—
 that *all* who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life,
 and I will raise them up on the last day.

Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said:

I am the bread that came down from heaven.

They were saying: Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?

How can he now say: *I have come down from heaven?*

Jesus answered them:

Do not *complain* among yourselves.

No one can come to me unless drawn by the *Father* who *sent* me

(and I will raise that person up on the last day).

It is written in the prophets: *And they shall ALL be taught by God.*

Everyone who has *heard* and *learned* from the Father comes to me.

(Not that anyone has *seen* the Father except the one who is from God—*He has seen* the Father.)

Very truly I tell you—*whoever* believes *has* eternal life.

I AM the bread of life.

Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they *died*.

This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and *not* die.

I AM the living bread that came down from heaven.

Whoever eats *this* bread will live *forever*.

And the *bread* that I will give for the life of the world is *my flesh*.