

- 1) If you have some concerns about the political health of our nation at the moment, there may just be a thin silver lining in the dark cloud of today's story from Hebrew Scripture. Chaotic though things MAY seem in our own setting, they don't YET seem QUITE as bad as THIS. In graphic detail, over nine chapters—of which we've only heard the endgame—the storytellers of Second Samuel unfold a tale of total political meltdown: intrigue, deception, sedition, insurrection, double agent espionage, battlefield slaughter, the assassination of a charismatic, long-haired royal heir who has become a rebel—and all this shot through with adultery, rape, suicide, and murder.
(Check out the high stakes drama in 2 Samuel 11-19; but fasten your seatbelt, it's a bumpy ride.)
- 2) The 17th Century philosopher Thomas Hobbes saw politics as a constant battle to keep at bay what he calls "The State of Nature"—the driving force beneath social interaction. "A war of all against all," Hobbes calls it—where life is "solitary, nasty, brutish, and short." The energy we keep investing to restrain this state of nature spawns competing power plays in perpetual cycles—efforts all fixated on self-preservation, that eventually devolve into self-destruction. This certainly seems to fit the case of King David, who wins back his throne and loses his son. The Biblical Storytellers pull no punches—they detail the tragic dynamics, spasm by spasm. If Hobbes is right, they're just telling it like it is. Civil discourse—it's only superficial; civil society—it's very fragile. Leviathan, as Hobbes calls it—the Beast within—we temporarily cage it, but we never tame it.
- 3) Hard on that grim picture, however—in the very next reading from the Letter to the Ephesians, we've also been met today by a list of earnest but upbeat moral admonitions:
 - *Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak truth to our neighbors.*
 - *Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up—as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.*
 - *Be kind to one another—tender hearted—forgiving one another.*Makes you wonder, doesn't it: On what planet does THIS starry-eyed idealist live? It sounds like a world where TWEETS are only the cheerful sounds of singing birds. The saga of Absalom and David is depressing—but it's recognizable, realistic. Framed against the daily news, these exhortations from Ephesians read like a manifesto for Politics Impossible in the ongoing "war of all against all," where peace is never more than hostilities momentarily suspended. Truth, grace, kindness in speech—employed only for what needs building up—as an ideal, that sounds lovely, but reality seems to mock it—doesn't it? When we try to live up to the ideal and fail, it fosters our frustration; When we give it our best shot, and that gets used against us, it fosters our cynicism.

Speech that is only true, gracious, kind, forgiving—
sounds pretty good within these walls, may sometimes be possible in our homes,
can help facilitate commercial transactions: *Thanks for your business—Have a nice day.*
But in the escalating war of words that characterizes our culture currently, it's hard to know
just how such ideals can be deployed in strategic practice—
let alone what good that might accomplish.

- 4) More on that shortly—but let's pause to note that the claims Jesus makes
about being the Bread of Life can easily evoke a similar sense of disconnect.
Bread from heaven—what practical difference does such Bread make in a “war of all against all”?
No wonder those who hear of it complain:
We don't trust your credentials, Jesus—Show us a sign.
Having just GIVEN such a sign in the feeding of five thousand, however;
Jesus won't let himself get drawn into yet another demonstration of mass bread production.
Jesus shifts the conversation from the MAKING of bread to the MEANING of Bread.
He tries to redirect their fixation on short-term CONSUMPTION needs
to a focus on their deeper, long-term CONNECTION needs.
They are inextricably caught up in the inevitable anxiety of “a war of all against all” mentality.
They are understandably desperate to grab as MUCH as they can for as LONG as they can.
If Jesus won't be the KING they crave, they demand He be at least their BREAD MACHINE.
But Jesus won't play into their State of Nature mentality.
Their misunderstanding notwithstanding,
he invites them to envision themselves embraced in a very different state—a State of Grace—
a state where bottom line reality is not COMPETITION, but God-Given COMMUNION.
Jesus wants to richly nourish his anxious, war-weary listeners in that State of Grace
by connecting them with the core of His very being—
The Bread that I will give for the life of the WORLD, He says, is MY life—my flesh.
- 5) The author of the Letter to the Ephesians has this—God's gift in Jesus—very much in mind
as he tries to mentor a second generation of Christians who live in what seems an alien world.
At one level, the list of moral precepts he advocates is not so different
from other lists prescribed by pagan philosopher-coaches of the day.
But most of those moralists proffer strategies that are naive in a State of Nature world.
This author puts forward strategies his fellow Christians can employ
both to honor their heritage and to claim their legacy in a totally different cosmic social order—
not a State of Nature, but a State of Grace.
Don't speak falsely—speak only truth. Use language not for evil, but for good.
Don't succumb to talk that tears down, only use talk for that which builds up.
Be tender hearted, kind, forgiving—let your speech give grace to all who hear.
Grace HAS already been GIVEN to you,
so don't wall it up inside you, let it flow through you, and out from you.

Frankly, that's just crazy talk if, bottom line, we live in a State of Nature;

But, all appearances to the contrary, this author says, we don't—
rather we are grounded in God's State of Grace.

Earlier in his letter he declares: *God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing.*

In him we HAVE redemption . . . according to the riches of his grace that he has LAVISHED upon us.

For he is our peace. He has broken down the dividing wall, that is the hostility between us.

But this early Christian writer knows it can be very challenging

to be grace-giving in a State of Nature-seeming world; so he prays for those whom he mentors:

I pray, he says, 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.

It takes this letter writer three thick, rich chapters to show how God, through Christ,

has overcome the State of Nature and translated us—through His self-offering—

into a STATE of Grace that enables us to SHARE this grace.

(When you get home, give Ephesians 1-3 a close read.

Come to think of it, that will take you much less time—and do you much more good—
than reading 2 Samuel 11-19.)

The more we practice grace-giving speech,

the more we are able to comprehend the grace God gives—

grace in which we are grounded, through which we are upheld, into which we keep growing.

- 6) As members of Christ's Body—as citizens in God's State of Grace,
it is possible—and important—for us to have a measure of compassion
for those who gather this weekend to hurl angry speech acts—
hate speech that, by demeaning others, seeks to defend themselves.

That is a project as tragically self-defeating

as the senseless war which sets members of King David's family each against the other.

Arising from the ashes of a war of all against all, David's lament echoes across the ages:

O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom.

Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son.

The danger, of course, is that the kind of speech against which the Ephesians author warns—

that angry, hate speech further solidifies the very perception from which it arises:

that the world in which we live IS “a war of all against all.”

As people of faith we gather today, out in the public square, and in here at God's table—

not to scream back louder, but—nourished by the Bread of Life—to sing back stronger:

The State of Grace is the deeper truth—always has been—always is—always will be.

Truthful, kind, constructive, and forgiving speech SHOWS this to be so.

And this grace-giving speech both shares in and furthers God's own work of MAKING it so.