

Proper 14B

- 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 heard only the endgame—the storytellers of Second Samuel unfold a tale of total political meltdown: intrigue, deception, sedition, insurrection, double agent espionage, battlefield slaughter, assassination of a charismatic, long-haired royal heir turned rebel—and all this shot through with adultery, rape, suicide, and murder. (Check out the drama in 2 Samuel 11-19; but fasten your seatbelt, it's a wild ride.)
- 2) The 17th Century philosopher Thomas Hobbs saw politics as a constant battle to hold 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 endless cycles of competing power plays—efforts all fixated on self-preservation, eventually devolving into self-destruction. That certainly seems to fit the case of David, who wins back his throne and loses his son. The Biblical Storytellers pull no punches—they detail the tragic dynamics, spasm upon spasm. If Hobbes is right, they're just telling it like it is. Civil discourse—it's only superficial; civil society—precarious at best! Leviathan—the Beast within—we temporarily cage it, but we never tame it.
- 3) Hard on that grim picture, however—in the very next reading, we are met by a list of earnest, 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: On what planet does **THIS** starry-eyed idealist live? 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, the exhortations of the writer in the Letter to the Ephesians, read like a manifesto for Politics Impossible in the ongoing "war of all against all," where peace is never more than a temporary suspension of hostilities. Truth, grace, kindness in speech—employed only for what needs building up; as an ideal, it sounds lovely, but reality seems to mock it. When we try to live up to the ideal and fail, it fosters frustration; When we give it our best shot, and that gets used against us, it fosters 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

how such ideals can even be deployed in strategic practice—let alone what good that might do.

- 4) More on that shortly—but let's pause here 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—show us a sign.*

Having just GIVEN just a sign in the feeding of five thousand,

Jesus won't let himself get drawn into another demonstration of bread production.

He 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 long-term CONNECTION needs.

They are deeply mired in the anxiety that always attends “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 want Him at least to be their BREAD MACHINE.

But Jesus won't play into that State of Nature mentality.

Their misunderstanding notwithstanding,

he invites them to envision themselves enfolded in a different state—a State of Grace—

a state where bottom line reality is not COMPETITION, but God-Given COMMUNION.

Jesus wants to nourish war-weary listeners deeply 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 is my life—my flesh.

- 5) The author of the Letter to the Ephesians has God's gift in Jesus very much in mind

as he seeks to mentor a second generation of Christians living in what seems an alien world.

At one level, his list of moral precepts is not so different

from those prescribed by other philosopher-coaches of the day.

But most of them are proffering naively idealistic strategies in a State of Nature world.

This author puts forward strategies for his fellow Christians to employ as ways

of honoring their heritage and claiming 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.

Because grace has already been given to you,

so don't dam it up inside you, let it flow on through, and out from you.

Frankly, that's 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.

God, he declares earlier in his letter: *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 author knows that it can be very challenging
to be grace-giving in a State of Nature-seeming world; so he prays for those he mentors:
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.

It takes this letter writer three long, 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 that grace.

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

It 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 apprehend and comprehend the grace that 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—necessary, even—for us to have a measure of compassion
for those who gather this weekend to undertake speech acts
that, by negating others, seek to defend themselves.

It is a project as tragically self-defeating
as the senseless war that sets members of King David's family each against the other.
Arising from the ashes of the 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 kind of speech the author of Ephesians warns against
further the 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 that grace-giving speech shares in God's own work of MAKING it so.