

The Tragedy Cycle

The Rev. Pamela L. Foster

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 13, 2006

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

This is the age, we hope, of the hybrid car and today is the day of the hybrid sermon. I'm gonna try to combine a little bible study and a sermon. Cause I want to talk about both the readings for today. The reading from Samuel and the reading from the Gospel of John and I want to talk about tragedy. Tragedy. Tragedy lies in that story about Absalom and his father, King David. And with respect to the Gospel of John, tragedy lies in what has been made out of it, out of passage we read today and many other passages in John.

Tragedy is a frequent theme in Holy Scripture. For scripture when people turn away from God and from one another tragedy must ensue. Scripture is true to life. And yet tragedy does not have to be the end of the story because the over-arching story, our over-arching story, is of a God who is steadfast and who never gives up and who calls us continually to return. Like the father in the story of the Prodigal Son, the God we know always wants us to choose to come back to God. So tragedy doesn't have to be the end.

Of Prince Absalom and King David, before the passage that we read today, there has been a lot of tragedy, misunderstanding and hurt in this whole system. Absalom's full sister, Tamar, was raped many years ago by their half-brother, Amnon. David had many wives. Amnon then abandoned her, putting her out of his house, his chambers. Absalom expected their father to do something to punish Amnon. And we read that though Absalom expected it, David didn't do it because Amnon was his eldest son and he loved him very much. One of the things to note about this giant figure, David, which should give us all some comfort, is, that he's no paragon of virtue. He is often very foolish, quite self-indulgent and cruel and yet God chooses him and, when David will allow it, God uses him. See God never gives up.

Well, Absalom bided his time and several years later he invited all his brothers and the King to a sheep shearing festival. The King regretted the invitation but sent all the princes and at the great feast Absalom's henchmen killed Amnon. And Absalom went into exile. Several years after that King David allowed him to return to the court but would not permit him to come into his, David's, presence. Resentment grew in Absalom and he set out to get himself a following and he was quite successful. One day he mounted a rebellion against his father, the King, that forced the King to leave the royal city, flee from the royal city. But he was no match militarily for his father, who had, if you recall, once been a mercenary. David was a brilliant tactician, a brave fighter and a compelling leader. And one day in the heat of battle, by an accident, Absalom got hung up in a tree and David's men came along and ran him through, killed him. When David heard the news, he who had refused to set eyes on his son was desolate at this young man's death.

“Oh, my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom. Would I had died instead of you, oh Absalom my son, my son.”

The cycle of this story is sadly familiar. The child rebels. The parent, unlike the father of the Prodigal Son who always had his arms out for a welcoming embrace, cannot or will not embrace the child. The child has learned some of his or her attitude and behaviors from the parents. The child dies, the parent's grief is deep and tearing and despairing. Time can run out. Someone who has looked at this story over and over has said this about it. That David's grief speaks to us not only of parental loss, but also of his recognition that his own sins and Absalom's sins, and God's justice have all helped to bring this tragic moment to pass. We recognize in David's grief, our own grief over our own many losses. Losses we have experience not simply as victims but as perpetrators too. How much greater the grief when we know that we have helped it's cause. It is the despair of our soul coupled with the grief of our heart. The despair of our soul coupled with the grief of our heart.

The Gospel of John, as I have said the tragedy attached to the Gospel of John is the use that has been made of it. In the passage we read today and in others throughout this Gospel and in some passages in other Gospels, to be fair, the designation, the Jews, occurs. This designation has been misused by Christians of many, many eras to demonize people who are Jewish, to preach, to practice and to justify Anti-Semitism. I want to share with you some of the things I have learned about this Gospel and about the community out of which it arose. I know that some of you know these things, so I thank you for bearing with the repetition. I know you know that this is vitally important.

This Gospel is very different from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke on any number of counts that I will spare you today. But this I do want to say. This Gospel is a deep, rich, mysterious, theological reflection combined with proclamation about the Christ event. In this Gospel Jesus is the Word of God. The Word of God made flesh. And in this Gospel Jesus is fully aware and the writers of the Gospel have him declare over and over, fully aware of His oneness, His oneness with God. He shares in the Godness of God. It's not that He speaks the Word of God, He is the Word of God. It's not that He seeks to do the will of the Father, He is the will of the Father. Now this sounds familiar to us because it's been handed down to us, even if it is complicated and difficult when we try to understand it. But it wasn't so in the first century.

The first words of this Gospel are “In the beginning was the Word”, in the beginning, it's supposed to make us think about Genesis, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” How did God create, God spoke everything into being, the Word was God. Now I want to ask you to imagine, imagine, that you are a first century faithful Jew. You are a leader of a synagogue and you have received and you are teaching the faith that will not name God because God is too Holy to be named. When Moses asks God for God's name, God says, “I am that I am.” Or another translation, “I will be that I will be.” Don't try to name me. But now God has a name. At least certain people are proclaiming that God has a name and that God has taken flesh. It was so difficult for the religious leaders of Judaism at that time, to grasp that claim. Try to

imagine how difficult that was. The Christians Jews, all of the first Christians were Jews, the very first Christians. The Christian Jews of this particular community wanted to remain within Judaism wanted to remain within their own synagogue community. But there was this tension around what they were proclaiming. Both sides were trying to figure this out and they went back and forth and back and forth and the debate and the deliberation often became acrimonious. Have you ever heard of that? Think about the Anglican Communion today. Remember too, the community that produced this Gospel was a minority, a minority within a larger body. They believed that they offered unique insights and even important critique. The term loyal opposition might apply here. They probably thought they were reformers. Jesus probably thought He was a reformer. The key thing to remember about them is that when their Gospel reads the Jews or sometimes the Pharisees, they are referring to the recognized leaders with whom their leaders are debating. They are not referring to the entire people of God. They are not referring to all the Jews in the world at that time.

As many solid thinkers have pointed out, with an eloquence that I cannot match, every generation of Christians succeeding the one that wrought this Gospel, must reflect on and teach about its contents with the particular situation of the people who wrote it in mind. And that is not easy, but that's absolutely necessary, there have been tragic, dangerous, sinful consequences when Christian majorities of succeeding eras have used, have used these Gospel words, this rhetoric, to demonize all Jews. Turn it into the rhetoric of hate. Bringing despair to the soul of the world and grief almost beyond imagining as well as unspeakable suffering. It may be that we have learned from the Holocaust and the Inquisitions and Pogroms that preceded it, not to use Holy Scripture to demonize our Jewish sisters and brothers. The test of that, in my mind, is not only to examine our own heart, but also to ask them. When I examine our heart, I come out with pretty good results and when I have asked them I have heard that we still have much work to do on both sides, on both sides. Now given that, there is a further issue, it seems to me. A further issue that is squarely before us given the agonies of the days in which we live in many places around the world. The issue is this, can we, by God's grace, learn to refrain from demonizing those who practice any other faith? Our Muslim, fellow citizens of the world, come to mind readily. I mean, after all, there are terrorists, criminals and kooks arising out of every faith. Can we refrain from demonizing an entire faith because of tragic events, violent events in the world? And can we not only refrain but can we reach out? Our faith says that we can. Our faith says that hope lies in the work of reconciliation among people of faith and from people of faith into a world that doesn't know how to seek reconciliation. We people of faith, all faiths, need to be working on that by God's grace.

And that brings me to hope and to Jesus' words, "I am the bread of life, in this passage for today. At the beginning of the chapter in which the passage occurs, Jesus has done one of the many signs in the Gospel of John that show us who He is. Jesus has done the miracle of the loaves and fishes. And now we hear, in words attributed to Him, by the worshipping community that wrote this Gospel, what this community believed about Him. What they have handed down to us, what we believe now. That not only was He capable of assuaging the hunger and slaking the thirst of people physically, but also He

assuages the hunger and slakes the thirst of our spiritual hunger and thirst. He does this by making possible a better way to live with one another and with our God.

I think it was Henry Nouwen who said that eating and drinking are a way of receiving. In eating and drinking we acknowledge that we are not sufficient unto ourselves. We're not full; we can't make ourselves full by ourselves. We are born to need. We are born to need physical sustenance, and we are born to need spiritual sustenance. We can only be grateful when our needs are provided for, that's why we say grace before a meal. But are we? Are we grateful? It appears to me that we are not. We don't like being people who need so we find all kinds of ways to turn from God and one another. Personally and privately think of the dynamic of that David story. It's contemporary. And we find corporate ways, think about how we have used scripture to persecute and demonize others. That doesn't have to be. There is another way and Jesus shows it to us. It is to acknowledge our need, to help each other to acknowledge our need and to allow the Lord God to nourish us for the work of reconciliation in God's world. We believe that in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ Our Lord, the old ways, the ways of hatred and death, died. And the way of the Creator God is offered to us every minute of every day. So we have a choice, we have a choice. We can gratefully allow the bread of life to nourish us or we can refuse that nourishment. The cost of that is that we continue in despair of the soul coupled with grief of the heart.

The question before every generation of Christians is, how do we choose to respond to the Bread of Life that we have been offered? Or as one of my colleagues put it last week, are we in or are we out? The temptation is always to repeat the cycles of the past with which we are familiar. But that means reliving the tragedy cycle. Look at the world we live in. But the truth is we can be nourished to walk into a future that we can only see dimly, yes, because we haven't gone there yet. Setting our course for reconciliation and acknowledging our dependence on God alone. That is what the God who never gives up calls us to do. That God declares the tragedy cycle can be broken. But as you and I know all too well, time can run out. Amen.