

Scripture passage: 2nd Samuel 6:1-6 and 12-21;

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Family squabbles

Since we studied 2nd Samuel some last week, I decided to keep on the same trail, continuing our study and going a little deeper into it this week. If you were here last week you heard that the book, Second Samuel, tells the story of the rise of power of David, who lived around 1000 BC. David was born in Bethlehem which is in Judah, but beginning in his early years he becomes almost a wunderkind of sorts for the nation of Israel. He proves himself to be a brave and capable young warrior against the Philistines, who are Israel's enemy. You will also remember that the king of Israel during David's young years was Saul, and that David marries Michal, Saul's daughter. When Saul dies, David, who has become the King of Judah, is the likely candidate for the Kingship of Israel as well. After all, not only is he a war hero in the eyes of the Israelites, he now has a kinship line to the throne, as Michal's husband. Again, last week we learned that under King David, Judah and Israel are united for the only time in the long history of the Middle East.

Ok. That was last week. In this week's passage we learn about two of the strategies David uses to unite Judah and Israel. One, he establishes a capitol for the heretofore two nations. David had been residing in Hebron, the capitol of Judah, but he sees that capitol as problematic for the Israelites. After all, they have no claim to Hebron. David chooses Jerusalem for his new capitol. Jerusalem is a neutral territory since it is outside the boundaries of both nations. David captures the city, and establishes his palace on a hill there. That's David's first strategic act toward unification—establishing a capitol both nations can call their own. Two, as we read today, David moves the ark of the Covenant, which had been captured by the Philistines but lately recovered, to this new capitol. These two actions are critical toward making Jerusalem both the political and the religious headquarters of his new unified kingdom.

Obviously, David can read the pulse of the people. As last week, again this week we commend David for his political savvy. But, as last week, there is more to be gleaned from what we read today. As David waltzes into Jerusalem in advance of the ark of the covenant in his skivvies—well, not exactly skivvies-- an ephod is a kind of wrap that priests wore—but a very small wrap—if you get my drift—As David waltzes into Jerusalem in advance of the ark displaying skin and religious exuberance, we read that his wife Michal watches the proceedings from her palace window and she (quote) “Despises David in her heart.” “What?” we say to ourselves. “That's kind of out of context. What's up with that?” And then the text goes on to say that after that revealing dance, David and Michal cease to live as husband and wife. That doesn't belong in the Bible does it? It seems more like gossip column fare—something you'd read in Star or People Magazine.

It's these last somewhat sordid and gossipy bits of information, though, that I want to discuss today—and not how David's faith was the key to his success, although it might have been—and not the wisdom or the lack thereof of mixing religion with politics in Jerusalem—although I was tempted. I want to talk about family dysfunction.

This week in my lectionary group, we discussed our passage for today and specifically David's dysfunctional relationship with Michal. Isn't it funny how folks always think they have to take sides when presented with a disagreement or conflict? We have to find a reason and we have to find someone to blame. Pastors are no different. It's not right maybe but I suspect that tendency lies deep within our genetic coding. Anyway, the majority of the pastors at the lectionary group said, "Well, it's obvious what has happened. Michal can't understand David's great love for God. She doesn't like to be second best to anyone, including our Lord. That's why she despises David."

To get a different take on the reason for the disharmony and who's to blame in this fractured relationship we have to read outside today's text. In 1 Samuel 18:20 we read: "And Michal loved David." Michal loves David so much in fact that she risks her life for his sake, or at least her relationship with her father, King Saul. After their marriage, when King Saul becomes paranoid and angry about David's rising fame and power, Michal lowers husband David over her dad's palace wall in a basket. David escapes back to Judah where he is safe from King Saul's wrath.

Now here we should note: The Biblical writer never says that David loves Michal. And you have to wonder... Not too long after the basket-lowering-incident, David takes two **more** brides. Do I hear any boos or hisses here? Then, too, in our lectionary group, all of us took a close look at a very curious line in our scripture passage for today. Maybe you noticed it when I read it earlier. Michal is upbraiding David for dancing in near nakedness before his female subjects and David says, "I have danced before the Lord. I will make myself yet more contemptible than this, and I will be abased in my own eyes; but by the maids of whom you have spoken, by **them** I **shall** be held in honor." It's a confusing line for sure, but it could be that what David means is, "Although I am a **humble** man (which should raise our eyebrows for sure—there's something amiss when a person brags about his humility), "Although I am a HUMBLED man, can I help it if the ladies swoon when they see my glorious body? Far be it for me to deny them." If that's what David's saying, it's small wonder that there's disharmony on the home front. So, who's to blame for the breakup in the marriage? Well as in most contentious relationships, it's probably as they say, "Six of one half dozen of the other."

If you've been listening carefully, maybe you've become a little anxious because up to this point, God has not really entered our discussion. But it's time. We've considered both parties in the David/Michal union; now let's throw in a God question for us to consider: "Where does God fit into this dysfunctional relationship?" If the subject of David and Michal's marital disharmony seems improperly included in holy scripture, even more improper might be the notion that God could be present in that marital disharmony. I mean, to some people, familial discord is contrary to the will of God, therefore God is nowhere in the marital discord David and Michal are experiencing. God is an outside observer. Perhaps God is even a **judgmental** outside observer. That sounds harsh and even contrary to what we learn in church, which is that God is loving and kind and forgiving and merciful. Yet, I think a lot of us believe this judgmental stuff despite your pastor's words to the contrary. It's deep within our subconscious this notion that God is condemning us for the wrongs we do. Or that we suffer because it is our due. That is in fact, I think, why some people leave the church

when marital or family crisis hits. Just when they need God and their church family the most, they drift away. "I'm not good enough to be here," they think. What a travesty!

In seminary I took a number of pastoral counseling courses. I remember one class very vividly because it was so gut-wrenchingly honest. Students bared their souls about their personal issues, their disappointments, their failures. There was much weeping and gnashing of teeth. In fact, I would guess that not one of us left that class dry-eyed. Afterwards, some of us ate lunch together in the seminary cafeteria. We tried to sort out what we had experienced. Then it hit me. You might call it an epiphany. No light from heaven, maybe, but a definite stirring in my soul. That epiphany is, "There is no such thing as normal in family relationships. All families are dysfunctional." And with that, I remember feeling a great weight lifted. For so long in my own life, I had been trying to pass off my family, not as exceptional, but at least as normal. But really, there is no such thing as normal when it comes to family relationships. With years of pastoral counseling under my belt, I am even more convinced: There is no such thing as normal. Again, all families are dysfunctional; all relationships are, to a degree, dysfunctional.

So, if God is an outsider in dysfunctional families, then God is very lonely indeed. But that can't be true, can it? It makes sense that if God loves us, God chooses to be in the thick of our miseries, our tribulations, our arguments, and our disagreements. God is weeping with us, cheering us on, and at all times encouraging us to grow and become all that God has intended us to be. God was in the midst of David and Michal's marital strife. Who knows. Perhaps with God's help, both parties learned to be stronger and more enlightened people as a consequence of their relationship, difficult as that relationship proved to be. We **don't** know of course, , because unfortunately the Biblical writer ends his saga of David and Michal with those very sad and abrupt words, "And Michal, the daughter of Saul, had no child to the day of her death." Yet we know from our Bibles that God continued to be present in David's life. It's a good guess that God continued to be present in Michal's life as well.

We have come to the end of our in-depth reading of the text. It occurs to me, though, that perhaps today we have done something more than read. Besides reading our text, we have allowed the text to read us. This text has caused us to take an assessment of our own lives; to admit our own propensity to judge and cast blame, and perhaps to admit to ourselves where our own lives intersect with the lives of our two biblical characters. It is a blessing that the Biblical writers saw fit to include this piece of "sordid gossip" in our Bible—which turns out to be a very honest, thought provoking text for us all. Amen