



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 12, Proper 14 – Year B
August 12, 2018

[RCL]: 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; Psalm 130; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51

2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33

In this passage, Absalom, one of David's sons, has rebelled against his father for the kingship of Israel, but this act of rebellion doesn't change the fact that David still loves his son and doesn't want him to be a casualty of the ensuing war. That's why he says to his commanders, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." This instruction, however, is in vain. Chillingly, it's as if the Cushite (here, Ethiopian) who brings the "good tidings" of Absalom's death has no idea either that Absalom is David's son, or that David had given instructions that Absalom not be harmed. As everyone else celebrates, David grieves the death of his son all by himself, in his "chamber over the gate."

- In a world of constant war and violence, some people may rejoice over the death of people deemed to "deserve it," whether they be terrorists, enemy combatants, murderers, or people otherwise considered dangerous to public order. How does our thinking change in light of:
 - the fact that all people, including our mortal enemies, have parents and loved ones who mourn just as we do?
 - the sanctity of all human life?

Psalm 130

This psalm of mourning, (proverbially) written by David himself, asks a central question of the human condition: "If you, Lord, were to note what is done amiss, O Lord, who could stand?" The answer, of course, is nobody. Nobody except God is sinless, and it's this inescapable reality of human sin that the psalmist is mourning.

But the psalmist is not without some hope, when he says to God, "For there is forgiveness with you." The psalmist knows that with God—and God alone—rests the authority to forgive sins. Since God's judgment is ultimate and true, our ability to turn to God for forgiveness should elicit some apprehension on our part: "Therefore you shall be feared."

And yet, notice that the psalmist doesn't dwell on this fear, but rather on *hope* that "[God] shall redeem Israel from all their sins." This is a sneak-peek of God's plan to definitively redeem all of God's people. As Christians, we believe this "plenteous redemption" is Jesus Christ, himself the very same God who has the authority to forgive sins.

- What are the ways in which you and/or your congregation make the mercy of God known to your community?

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

This passage from Ephesians does a pretty great job of showing how the above themes apply to our daily lives. Here, Paul discusses the importance of minimizing harshness and maximizing forgiveness in Christian community. It follows naturally from the above psalm that, if God is the one who forgives sins, our own acts of forgiveness are a participation in and a reflection of God's forgiveness: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you." That's how we become "imitators of God."

In other words, it's not enough simply to meditate on God's forgiveness of our own sins; rather, our active forgiveness of one another is a necessary part of how we make God's forgiveness known in the world. This also means that, even though Paul is talking about behavior in a specific Christian community (i.e., Ephesus), we must extend forgiveness to everyone, even if they're not part of the Body of Christ, as far as we can tell.

- Are the following verses paradoxical? Discuss in context Paul's treatment of anger.
 - "Be angry but do not sin..." (4:26)
 - "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger..." (4:31)

John 6:35, 41-51

As Christians in a Eucharistic tradition, we know, believe, and experience the truth of what Jesus is saying in this passage, often on a weekly or even daily basis. In the Eucharist, we have the great benefit of seeing how these words of Jesus are pointing to himself not simply in a figurative (or, for that matter, literal) sense, but in a much more profound sense, transcending categories like "literal" and "figurative," implicating the entire creation story and transforming all of reality: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

And yet, to many in Jesus' immediate audience – described here (polemically) as "Jews" but which could also be skeptics of any background – this talk of "living bread" and "eternal life" makes zero sense. Even now, to many people in the modern world, both those who are secular and those who adhere to other faiths, Jesus' claims are outlandish and unbelievable, perhaps nowhere more so than this passage.

- How do we, as Christians, respond to skeptics who are unaccustomed to how Jesus is talking in this passage?

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