

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

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

^{18:5} The king ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, saying, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." And all the people heard when the king gave orders to all the commanders concerning Absalom. ⁶ So the army went out into the field against Israel; and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. ⁷ The men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the slaughter there was great on that day, twenty thousand men. ⁸ The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword. ⁹ Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. His head caught fast in the oak, and he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on. ¹⁵ And ten young men, Joab's armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him, and killed him. ³¹ Then the Cushite came; and the Cushite said, "Good tidings for my lord the king! For the LORD has vindicated you this day, delivering you from the power of all who rose up against you." ³² The king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" The Cushite answered, "May the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man." ³³ The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

Commentary

A deeply alienated Absalom patiently schemed to win over David's subjects. Finally, having gained some power, he attempted to seize the throne from his father. A politically weakened David still maneuvered the site of the decisive battle. He divided his army into three groups, assigned each group a commander, and then weakly agreed to remain at the gates of the city to hear news of the battle. Before sending his armies to battle, David pled with his commanders to "deal gently with the young man Absalom." Sometime during the battle, Absalom rode under a great oak tree entangling his thick hair in the branches. Walter Brueggemann in Interpretation suggests that Absalom hung "suspended between life and death, between the sentence of a rebel and the value of a son, between the severity of the king and the yearning of a father." This was reported to the commander and he was killed, and when they came to deliver the news of the battle to David, he wanted only news of his son. The runners were

afraid that bad news delivered to the King might result in his own death, but it was the father, not the king, who responded.

Reflection

David grieved a rebellious son, but still had a kingdom to govern. How would you describe the relationship between Absalom and David? When have you felt caught between private and public or professional roles? How have you dealt with this tension? What is the predicament that plagues David? How does this speak to us today?

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

^{4:25} So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. ²⁶ Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and do not make room for the devil. ²⁸ Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹ Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³² and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. ^{5:1} Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ² and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Commentary

The writer, having urged Christians to live lives worthy of their calling, now instructs them how to do this. Rules for Christian living are found here, and the writer takes a negative view of Gentiles based on pagan stereotypes: they lied, hated, talked vulgarly, and took unfair advantage of others. He also exhibits an attitude of religious superiority: assuming that Gentile pagans were impure, when in reality, the Stoics, for example, had high ethical standards. The writer follows up these negatives with a short positive list: be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving. To be “sealed for the day of redemption (4:30)” refers to the role of baptism in sanctifying the believer. The key to all this is found in the final dual recommendation: Imitate God by forgiving and loving, and as “dearly beloved children.” This phrase reminded readers that through Christ God had included Gentiles as heirs, creating one new humanity from two different groups: Jew and Gentile.

Reflection

Ephesians calls believers to imitate God by forgiving and loving. Think of times in your life when you tried to imitate God. How successful were you? What might you do differently the next time you find it a challenge to imitate God? How can we name sinfulness without stooping to name-calling and stereotyping?

John 6:35, 41-51

^{6:35} Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

^{6:41} Then the Jews began to complain about him because he said, "I am the bread that came down from heaven." ⁴² They were saying, "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How can he now say, 'I have come down from heaven?'" ⁴³ Jesus answered them, "Do not complain among yourselves. ⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me; and I will raise that person up on the last day. ⁴⁵ It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me. ⁴⁶ Not that anyone has seen the Father except the one who is from God; he has seen the Father. ⁴⁷ Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸ I am the bread of life. ⁴⁹ Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. ⁵⁰ This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. ⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Commentary

The "I Am..." declaration in verse 35 is the first of several such statements where Jesus depicted himself in terms of common objects well-known to the culture: bread (6:35), light (8:12), gate (10:7), shepherd (10:11), life (11:25), and vine (15:1). Together the metaphors and titles suggest that no one image can adequately portray who Jesus is. It seems John intended to expand, not restrict, the ways we understand and approach Jesus. Jesus was interrupted by the grumbling crowd. Here for the first time people were identified as "the Jews," by which John meant the authorities (not all Jews) who were resistant to accepting who Jesus was. These leaders assumed that by identifying Jesus' parentage, they could dismiss his claim to be the bread of heaven. The crowd had mentioned the manna from the Exodus story (6:31). John was reminding readers of the rest of the story by using the word "complain" or "grumble." These complaining Jews were just like their grumbling ancestors—they could not see, yet, what God was doing! Jesus addressed them by saying those who "hear and learn" will come to Jesus in faith, and as Jesus referenced the manna, he changed "our" to "your," thus distancing himself from them and their history. This crowd who had just been fed miraculously also would die unless they heard and received the true bread of life.

Reflection

Does the "bread of life" metaphor for Jesus have meaning for you? How? If it does not, what metaphors or titles for Jesus do speak to you?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 130

- 1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.
2 Lord, hear my voice!
**Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!**
- 3 If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
4 **But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.**
- 5 I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
6 **my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.**
- 7 O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
8 **It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.**

Closing Prayer

**Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**