

Legacy, Not Luggage
2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33
Sunday, August 9, 2009

The story behind King David's cry, *Absalom, Absalom*, is poignant and too complicated to try to unravel here. Let me simply say that David as king of Israel made choices that set his son Absalom against him. Once Absalom chose rebellion – even though David tried to protect Absalom from the consequences of Absalom's own actions – the die was cast and Absalom's death was inevitable. Yet the final word comes not from King David, but from David the father, and it is a cry of remorse and sadness: *Absalom, Absalom, my son, would that I had died in your place!* Clearly David the Father might have done things differently than David the King.

So it is from one generation to the next. I cannot tell you how many times in my ministry I have had a parent talk to me and face the truth that no parent can protect a child from the consequences of his or her own actions. I cannot tell you how many times that same parent has felt deeply responsible for actions taken by the child. It is as though some spiritual baggage has been handed to the child that any *good* parent would have foreseen and avoided. Alcohol, foolish driving, broken relationships, anger, bad choices – they seem to pass from one generation to the next, not inevitably, but enough to leave a broad trail of tears.

And yet David is remembered not as a kingly failure or a parental misfit, but as a man who knew how to approach God. To put it another way, despite David's wayward heart, kingly pretensions, and strategic mistakes, David learned two absolutely key lessons: not to avoid the truth and not to avoid God. The legacy that David leaves behind him is not some trail of tears, but a memory of a man who could dance before God, sing of God, pray with all his heart for forgiveness, tell God's story in his life with joy and power. We call this legacy the Psalms – King David's Psalms – and they are a sign to us that God does not burden any generation with the past – if we also will not avoid the truth and God.

This is a sermon addressed to anyone who wonders what legacy you will leave behind. Some of you have children, others don't. I doubt that anyone here has not at some point glimpsed your own mortality and wondered what you have given the world, what the balance sheet looks like for good or ill. The question is especially hard on parents because a parent can look his or her child in the eye and see there a reflection of the parent's life and mistakes. But the question applies to all of us: what legacy would we leave?

I have to laugh at myself. Some years ago I began to put together a binder called My Favorite Things. It's really sort of a scrapbook of news articles that struck me at one time or another, poignant pictures, some poet's poetry I like the sound of, cartoons that made me laugh, scraps of wisdom from here and there. And the truth is that I had in mind that one day my children would come across my binder and open it and say – wow, cool, this is interesting – this is what Dad thought and laughed at and this is what he was committed to and this was where his quirky idea of beauty came from, and they would appreciate me.

What was I thinking? If they have not *seen* in me what is important and *heard* me tell the story to them because it is important to tell, no scrapbook is going to help them! Do you see? What we owe those we leave behind is not someone else's story, but our own.

How many of you have albums or maybe boxes of old family pictures in your home? Did someone ever sit down and write a few notes about who and where and what? I'm so grateful that my father in his retirement took the time to go through boxes of stuff and sort it all out and leave me notes to all the pictures. Now I know that this one is my grandfather courting my grandmother, and this is he recovering from war wounds. This is the Downs syndrome child, my uncle, they had whom nobody talked about. This is the great great uncle from Duxbury, Massachusetts, who became a doctor to lepers on the Hawaiian Island of Molokai, and this the wild-eyed youngest brother, first mate on a Pacific cruise ship, alcoholic and womanizer, after whom, strangely enough, I am named. Do you see? Unless my father had annotated the stuff, I would not know whole pieces of my own story.

There is no story to leave behind, you see, unless you tell it.

And there is no legacy that matters unless it is the truth. And the truth is so much more than albums or facts. The truth is who you are.

There's a wonderful movie called *Greenfingers*. Have any of you seen it? In it a man named Colin is serving time for murder. The truth Colin tells himself is that he has gotten what he deserves. So that's what he is: a murderer. While in prison, though, he is asked to take on a garden – something he knows nothing about. Without telling you the whole story – which is funny and delightful – Colin discovers that the truth about himself is not that he is a murderer, but that he is a gardener, and that gardening is his way back to life and forgiveness.

You see, your legacy is so much more than your life story, it's what you do with your story. And that's where God comes in. You are not alone in your story and you are not without a source of power. You have a God who will not leave you alone with the burden of your story if you come to God and ask. You must ask: *God, what shall I do with this story and how do you want to be with me in it?* You must ask, and ask, and ask and ask again. Over time and asking you will discover what your real story is and then you will be shown a way to be in your own story that has grace and beauty.

I have hope and conviction that the greatest legacy I can leave my children is that I have done my own work in life. Therefore they are free to do theirs. I leave them my conviction that God is good and God was never – is never – done with me. Therefore I have a living God, not somebody's old idea of God. Instead of luggage and baggage, I leave my children my own peace.

Do not be afraid of your own story. Your legacy, after all, is not the facts, but what you did with them. Believe this, I beg you. Believe King David's words in the Psalm this morning. Believe that you have every reason to face your whole story and every reason still to say to all who might hear: *Praise the Lord. I give thanks to the Lord with all my heart.*

You see, the greatest legacy you can leave behind you is your confidence that you found a way through. And you believe that those who follow you and wonder – can, too.