

Tears for Fallen Might

By Rev. Jonathan A. Malone

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27

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“How the mighty have fallen!”

Movement 1 – The Dissonance of David’s Lament

People want to move forward, but David is not yet ready to move forward.

It was the beginning of a new time. It was the beginning of a new era and a new chapter in the history of Israel. It was the beginning of a new time. For too long, Israel was torn as it tried to follow its king, Saul, as he was pulled between his blood lust and hatred for David and his duty to protect Israel against the Philistines. For some time, the Israelites watched Saul crumble before them, his mind slowly deteriorating, his psyche becoming more and more clouded and they wondered how much longer until Saul would fall into the abyss of madness. They watched with a torn heart as Saul chased David, the beloved warrior of the people, wondering why Saul would hate someone blessed by God. The people sang of David’s greatness, they told stories of his might, and praised his cunning. The people sang how Saul beat thousands but David beat tens of thousands. (1 Samuel 18:7) David was a hero, but he was not king. Instead, David was made an outlaw, chased by Saul. Torn in two directions, Saul was running like a madman after David and holding back the Philistines, and Israel was torn.

But Saul had died and Israel was now on the brink of a new time. Jonathan, Saul’s son, had also died, and the chance of his succeeding Saul was washed away like sand after a rainstorm. Maybe Jonathan would have been a good king, but that possibility is now gone. There was now a void of leadership in Israel, and the people looked to David as the next natural leader, even over Saul’s next of kin. David was wise, David was kind, and David was strong. He was a capable military leader and a capable administrator. David was well liked by the people and it seemed to be the clear choice. Like a vacuum in space demanding to be filled, the desire for leadership pulled to David as the next king for Israel. It was the beginning of a new time for Israel.

But not yet for David.

Something was holding David back. If you were to read the verses just before this passage, you would note that the messenger bringing to David the news of Saul’s death expected David to rejoice. After all, David’s enemy had been defeated and now David could again walk the lands without constantly looking over his shoulder. Yet instead David was grieved, and sorrowful, and condemned the messenger’s joy (he also condemned the messenger to death). David was holding back, and was not yet ready to go forward. David wanted to name the passing of Saul, and wanted to grieve the death of Jonathan. He hesitated to jump into the void; he hesitated to take the reigns and continue to move forward; something was holding him back. He was not so hasty to put the crown on his head. He was not so hasty to sit on the throne.

It is like a church calling an interim pastor after the senior pastor leaves. Especially if the church loses the pastor in a tragic way, that interim pastor deliberately names the loss of the last pastor. That interim pastor is not so quick to prepare for the next pastor, but takes the time to grieve, to remember and to sit with the loss. No doubt the members of the church would like to just move forward, start a new search, but it is important to stop and name the grief.

Like Israel just outside the promise land, in the wilderness after leaving Egypt, the people were ready to go in, but God wanted to hold them back just a little longer. Like Jesus in the garden that Thursday night before his crucifixion, Peter was ready to witness the glory of the Lord when the soldiers came, but Jesus said his time had not yet come. Yes, it was a new time. It was a new time for Israel, it was a new time for God’s people, but David wanted to hold back from jumping forward. David wanted to pull back from the new hope and stay in the grief and the memory of Saul and Jonathan. It was the beginning of a new time for Israel, but not yet.

Movement 2 – The Inauthentic Quality of David’s Lament

His relationship with Saul was tragic, and David wants to make space for the tragedy

David seemed to describe Saul’s leadership with rose-colored glasses. Or at least this is how it seemed on the surface. In his poem, in his eulogy and his lament, David seems to lift Saul up onto a pedestal. David seems to honor Saul, and maybe more than Saul deserves. Maybe those around David heard his eulogy with a melody of dissonance. Maybe they heard it as odd and unexpected. After all, Saul was trying to kill David. After all, Saul was not the best king. After all, Saul was the thorn in David’s side, and we would expect to hear David breath a sigh of relief. We would expect to hear David spout negative words, slanderous words about Saul, but instead we hear Saul and lifted up. We’re not surprised about Jonathan, he and David were closest of friends, like brothers, but we are surprised about David’s words about Saul.

The fact is David had a broken relationship with Saul. Remember when David was in the cave and snuck up on Saul. Remember how David was torn between killing his enemy and honoring his king; for Saul was both? (1 Samuel 26:6-25) This is the brokenness of David’s relationship with Saul, and it is as if one last time David wants to try and reclaim the good in his relationship with his sometimes friend and sometimes enemy. After all, they did not start off on negative ground. David won favor from Saul when he slew Goliath. David won more favor from Saul when he would play music for him. Yet a darkness clouded Saul’s mind, and a rift grew between the king and the shepherd boy. It was a rift that tore at both of the men’s hearts and one that was never healed. Now that Saul was dead, David was left with a complicated grief from a tragic relationship. He grieves from a “double consciousness” desiring to speak good and relief at the same time.

How does one speak well of one’s enemy? How does one take the time and make the space to glorify the one with whom you have friction? In the movie *The Gangs of New York* the Butcher continues to glorify the Priest as a great person, the only great person even though the two were enemies. Yet even after a bloody battle ending with the Butcher killing the Priest, the Butcher took care of the Priest’s son, and honored the Priest every year as a great man. How does one honor those whom we do not like? It is like having to offer a good job reference for someone who drove you nuts. Or when you are asked to say ten nice things about someone who you can only think of twenty bad, we find ourselves looking at David and wondering, “How does he do it?” What drives someone to find the good in the one they despair?

It is like asking a Palestinian speak well of an Israeli? Or asking a Northern Ireland IRA speak well of a Northern Ireland Loyalist? It was shocking, it was startling, and it was unexpected to hear David’s powerful and uplifting lament for Saul and Jonathan. It was almost as if David was looking at Saul’s life and leadership with rose-colored glasses. It was almost as if David were trying to make amends with Saul after he had died, and calling all of Israel to follow his example. Walter Brueggemann speaks of this action of naming grief. Brueggemann describes Jeremiah’s actions of naming grief over a fallen society and calling the people to lament. David is naming the grief of a fallen king, of a broken time, and of a broken relationship that can never be regained, and calling the people to lament. Before rushing forward, David is calling the people to name and claim what they are leaving. He is guiding the people, not to a new time, but to state of grief over that which was lost and the brokenness which is the history of Israel under Saul.

Movement 3 – The Lack of Our Laments

We want to only move forward.

We seem to have difficulty lamenting, dwelling, or healing in our culture. We have a difficulty staying still in our culture. We have an urgency to move forward, we have an urgency to continue never looking back. We don’t stop to smell the roses, we take them with us. We take one or two days off when someone dies, and

then back to the grindstone. We look for a replacement when someone leaves and do not wait for our tears to fall. We rush our rehabilitations after our operation, because we need to keep moving. We are always looking for the new thing, the better thing and rush towards it without waiting a moment.

Our society is like a rushing stream tearing at chunks of the bank on either side; one chunk is grief, but we do not stop. Another chunk is brokenness but we do not stop. The stream must continue to move forward. I know of people who are always looking to the horizon with their work. They land a job and settle in, but not too much. They are constantly looking out for the next job to come along. We move and do not stop for the hurt or brokenness that we encounter.

When something breaks, we buy something new to keep moving forward. When change occurs, we work with the change and then continue to move forward. Very rarely do we try to understand the change. When we encounter brokenness in our relationships, we just move on and try to forget. Forgive and forget we are told. That is what David should do, forgive and forget. He should forgive Saul, and then forget about him so he can move forward to the next big thing.

And we look at David with the rest of Israel and wonder. We wonder why he hasn't run over and taken the crown. We wonder why David isn't just moving on. We wonder why it is that David is taking the time, to grieve when there are so many possibilities before him. We look at ourselves constantly moving forward, and we look at David taking the time to grieve, and we realize that in our culture we have a difficulty slowing down, stopping and grieving.

Movement 4 – The Inauthentic Nature of Our Laments

Yet we also have many tragic relationships and fallen histories which plague our past.

When we do grieve, we are often pulled to look at our past and our grief in an honest way, and that can be scary. It may be that we are afraid to look at the grief because we remember the ways we were wronged, the ways we have wronged, and the hurt that exists. We look at our loss and we become angry. We look at our loss and think about all that we did not do, all that is left undone and unfinished. It is like we look to David, and expect him to rant and rave about the way Saul made his life miserable. It is like looking to the one person who was again and again a thorn in our side. The majority of our grief is a complicated grief; it is a hurting grief that is not simple and clear. This is a grief that will take time, and time is not something we have in abundance.

I think for the racial grief our country is facing. While we have come a long way in the last 100 years, we still have a long way to go. Almost written in our country's narrative fabric is a tension between Whites, Blacks, Asians, Hispanics, Native Americans, and others. This tension exists because our relationships are broken on both sides and have been broken for some time. If you ever want to see this tension, watch the movie *Crash*. In that movie you will see stereotypes; brokenness and rage emerge in very real ways. The tension exists from our brokenness and emerges in unhealthy ways. Note the race riots of Detroit and L.A and you will note an eruption of the tension.

Think of grief in your family because of brokenness. Every family is struggling with a broken relationship between a brother and sister, a mother and daughter, an aunt and uncle, or husband and wife. The psychologist Charles Figley claims that if the relationship is not resolved, the tension will affect the family for generations. It is a tension that is hard to hold and understand because it is between family members; it is between two people who love each other.

In churches we have tragedies to grieve. We are full of broken relationships due to theological differences, due to spiritual differences, or due to differences of opinion. We have been hurt and we have hurt

each other. Yet we have prayed with each other, we have experienced the Holy Spirit with each other, and we have read the scriptures with each other. Our relationships are complicated and the brokenness is tragic.

How many broken relationships do we encounter on a daily basis in our world? Hindus and Muslims in India, Israelis and Philistines, Greeks and Turks, Catholics and Protestants, Blacks and Whites, Republicans and Democrats all come from a brokenness that is tragic. The tragedy we need to grieve. As Worden claims, to fully move on with a loss we must stay with the grief and the hurt until we have made some level of peace. Just as David was doing with Saul.

And most importantly, our relationship with God is broken. We again and fall, fail, and turn from God. We know we are accepted back, but at times our heart is too heavy with guilt and grief.

How do we remember and how do we grieve when we would rather just forget it and move on? How do we make sense of the tragic and complicated parts of our past? Like a child eating lima beans, we know it isn't going to taste good, and we would rather just push our plate away and move on. We don't have the rose glasses that David has but the clear ones that see history as it truly is, and we find it difficult to grieve or to celebrate.

Movement 5 – The Example of David

David was naming the tragedy.

But David gives an example of reconciliation. David wants to move forward, he will eventually take the crown, but he knows his history and his relationship with Saul will continue to plague and follow him unless he finds some kind of reconciliation. But the reconciliation will always be less than ideal. David's relationship with Saul will never be what it once was. In the work, *Gilead* the narrator's father and grandfather were close until they had an argument over war and Christianity. After that, although the two claimed to make amends, they never were the same, but walked as if they were carrying a shared wound – one that was greatest when they were around each other. They had a reconciliation, they worked through the brokenness, but the result was different than what they once had.

The ethics professor, Robert Franklin, talks about a kind of reconciliation known as “tragic reconciliation.” This is a reconciliation that names the brokenness of the relationship. This is a reconciliation that names something which will never be regained. David will never be able to reclaim his relationship with Saul because Saul is dead. The reconciliation David attempts will only go so far, and will never fully reclaim the relationship they once had. In a church when there is brokenness between two people, any reconciliation those might have will only go so far, because things change and will never be the same. This is not a “forgive and forget” model, but one that calls us to remember. We remember what has been lost and we grieve it. The reconciliation is tragic because it will never fully reclaim what once was.

In a family, if there is brokenness between a parent and a child, you know that things will never be reclaimed. It is tragic. But we must name that which is lost to regain our relationship. We must cry out with David that a great man has died, and we will never be able to mend our relationship. We must cry out with David that our heart has been scarred and the mark will always remain. We must cry out with David that there was a potential for a great relationship, but that potential is lost through our brokenness. It is naming the failure.

Even as a country, it is appropriate to name the places where we have not done well, and lament as we at the same time celebrate the places where we have done well. The lamenting is not in the action as much as the lost potential. We saved so many Jews when we intervened in World War II, why not in Cambodia or Somalia? We have so many resources as a nation, and yet hundreds of thousands of people die in our nation every year for lack of resources. This should cause us to grieve. And at the same time we praise the greatness of our nation with the grief on our hearts.

This honest history tastes the salt as David cries out the great person of Saul who has fallen. This honest and tragic reconciliation has salt as David cries out what could have been. We don't want to stop and engage in this reconciliation because it hurts. Yet the alternative is death of our souls and our spirits. The alternative is to live only in grief, or to live only in false bravado. We must name and hold up our brokenness if we are to move forward, no matter how tragic it will be. It is an example of reconciliation, tragic reconciliation.

Movement 6 – Taking Our Laments to the Table

At the table we also can name our tragedy

In the church, at the table is where our reconciliation can be made holy. We are called to come to the table and sit with Christ, just as we are. We are not called to live a perfect life before we dine with Christ. We are not called to walk without sin, but to sit with Christ just as we are. At the table, when we are with Christ, when we hear Christ reminding us that we will betray him again and again it is appropriate that we grieve. When we sit at the table and look across at the others whom we have betrayed again and again it is appropriate that we grieve. You can almost imagine David sitting at the table with Christ, his heart heavy because he has lost his friend, and he had lost his King. Yet at the table Christ calls all of our relationships to him. We look to Christ, and we mourn the ways in which we have hurt him, and then we are forgiven. At the table we are given again the chance and the opportunity to walk with Christ. We stumble with our sins, we limp with our shortcomings and we falter with our sorrows, but Christ calls us to walk again. At the table we are to meet our brother or sister who has wronged us and ask for forgiveness, ask for reconciliation, and then put it in the hands of Christ. For if we cannot meet our brother or sister at Christ's table, then we cannot follow Christ at all. At the table we can be honest and true with our own humanity and with our relationship with Christ.

You see, the table is about brokenness. The table is about our failings, our anger, and our grief. Christ takes the bread, breaks it and hands it to us. It is as if in that moment, Christ is taking our brokenness, handing it to us, and saying it is now my body. Your failure to forgive is now the brokenness of my body. Your failure to stop for the least is now the brokenness of my blood. Your tragic, broken relationships are now on me. The table is not a place for the holy but for the broken, and we all are broken; we all need to come around the table and grieve, and lament, and mourn.

One of my profound spiritual prayers at the table was when I had an epiphany of my own brokenness. In response I looked up to the Lord and said, "I'm sorry." The answer I heard, as clear as ever was, "I know." We need to take the time to say I'm sorry, we need to take the time to grieve, and we need to do it at the table.

Christ takes the tragic relationships of the world, Christ takes the brokenness of the church, Christ takes your sins and mine to the cross and it is at the table where we remember the action of Christ. For after sitting with us at the table, Christ will experience the brokenness of humanity to its natural end – death. But then he will rise again. Our relationships can be made whole. When we fall we can be lifted back up. The cracks and breaks in our church can be mended, because Jesus Christ will rise. The grace of God will reach through death and bring us together. The grace of God will find a way to bring Saul and David to the table. The grace of God will make a way to bring you and me to the table, and we will be made whole because Jesus Christ will rise. Only then will the tragic reconciliation for which we strive will be made a holy reconciliation through Christ. And we shall experience the glory of the Lord.

AMEN