

## The Importance of Imitating Christ

Over the past several weeks, we've looked closely at how Jesus's divine kingship differs from human royalty. Last week, the prophet Nathan told David that, because he had despised God's law by killing Bathsheba's husband so he could take her as his wife, the Lord would ensure that the sword would never depart from David's house. This morning, as Nathan foretold, trouble has come upon David's family on a truly Shakespearean scale. Our lectionary skips it all, so here's a quick synopsis. The baby David fathered with Bathsheba dies, but he still has several older children from his other wives. David's eldest son and heir, Amnon, forces himself on his half-sister Tamar, then rejects her. Tamar's full brother, David's son Absalom, kills Amnon, then flees. David eventually pardons Absalom, but Absalom decides to claim his father's throne and he cleverly woos the people away from David. They anoint Absalom to be their new king, civil war ensues, and Absalom successfully drives David and his followers out of Jerusalem. David's army encounters Absalom and his forces in the forest of Ephraim, where Absalom is taken captive and killed under circumstances so bizarre that we have to wonder if God had a hand in Absalom's death. David regains his throne but, as we just heard, mourns Absalom so extravagantly that his general, Joab, all but orders David to either pull himself together and go thank his troops for winning the battle or face mass desertion. It's a miserable story. There's no glory or honor for any member of David's family here.

The remainder of David's reign is an unending parade of troubles, more than we can go into this morning. (If you're curious, read the end of 2 Samuel and the first two chapters of 1 Kings.) Ultimately, David learns what any student of European monarchy or *Game of Thrones* fan could have told him: it's never wise for a king to sire too many heirs. However, David's troubles arose not because he fathered several ambitious princes, but because he chose Bathsheba

over the Lord. Although David and Adonai continue to bump along until the end of his life, David never regains his golden boy glow. His tragic story stands as a warning that sin can have permanent consequences. Even when we repent and God forgives us, the consequences of our misdeeds can linger like the remnants of an erased pencil sketch. The paper of our lives isn't entirely ruined. God can still use us for good things, but we're never quite pristine again.

Depressing as this can be, it's an inevitable aspect of the human condition. As C.S. Lewis observed in his book, *God in the Dock*, everyone has at least one "fatal" character flaw. We needn't be quite so negative, but Lewis is right that no one is without sin, and that our mistakes can tarnish even the best of us. David was and still is widely regarded as Israel's greatest king, so much so that prophecy insisted the Messiah could only come from David's royal line. Great as he was, however, David fell. His fate warns us never to idolize any human being, no matter how seemingly perfect. The higher the pedestal we put people on, the farther they have to fall. And fall they will, because that's what happens when we pretend that any of us is God.

Still, dwelling too long on human fallibility doesn't serve us well if we decide that God must be similarly flawed. When Jesus speaks this morning, it's to a different audience. Last week, Jesus told the people who followed him across the Sea of Galilee in the hope of another miraculous meal that he is the Bread of Life. Today, he's joined by those whom the Common English Bible calls "the Jewish opposition," probably representatives of the local synagogue. They grumble about Jesus saying he has come down from heaven. Isn't he just that undistinguished kid whose working-class parents they knew? Jesus doubles down, assuring them that no one can come to him unless drawn by the Father and promising to raise those who do on the last day. We can imagine his critics' disbelief; to them, he's nobody's king.

Jesus extends an impassioned invitation to relationship with him in this passage. As Bible scholar David F. Ford observes, the matter of who responds to him “has been a question of great controversy within Christianity.” John Calvin’s doctrine of predestination, the idea that the Father decides in advance who will be saved and we can only accept our lot, comes in part from this passage. In my opinion, Calvin was wrong. We can wonder why some of us are drawn to Jesus and others are not but, as Ford argues, “[t]here would be little point in writing the Gospel if all were predetermined. Instead, the ongoing drama of God's love for the world, and of the world's response, is still being played out ... we are invited to stay with Jesus and not ‘go away’ ... we are even encouraged to be agnostic about a great deal, especially the relationship of Jesus to others.” That leads us to the letter to the Ephesians.

Bible scholars who specialize in “form criticism” of Scripture dispute the authorship of six of the letters attributed to St. Paul in the New Testament. The letter to the Ephesians is one of them. Form criticism involves closely reading a text and comparing it with other materials that are known to have been written by a particular author. To oversimplify, a majority of Bible scholars argue that Paul probably didn’t write this particular letter because it doesn’t read much like his letters to the Romans and Corinthians. Scholars who disagree offer various explanations for that. For example, Paul’s writing style might have changed over time, or the scribes who worked with him might have copied his words incorrectly. More probably, however, this letter – which reads more like a compilation of good ideas for Christian churches than Paul’s usual progressive development of individual thoughts – was written by one or more of Paul’s admirers who used his name to give their text more authority. Personally, I think the authorship of the letter to the Ephesians is less important than the quality of its content, and this letter offers excellent advice to the members of the body of Christ.

As the Rev. Kirk Alan Kubicek points out in his 2021 sermon, “Abide in My Love,” John sets Jesus’s institution of the Holy Eucharist not at the Last Supper but in this passage, right in the midst of his ministry and day-to-day life. His invitation to join him at his Father’s table extends not only to his twelve closest companions, but to everyone who comes to him to be fed. It’s an invitation, though, not a command. The free will our God has given us includes the freedom to decline Christ’s invitation. When we do, I suspect Jesus mourns for us just as deeply as David mourned for his fallen son.

Although Jesus is everywhere, the Eucharistic table is set in Christian communities. As we heard last week, God “equips his saints for the work of ministry,” giving each of us various gifts for building up the body of Christ. To do that, Jesus asks us to put aside “all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven” us. Our task is no less than to “be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us.”

Our Lord asks a lot of his followers. He sometimes asks us to love people whom we would honestly rather turn away from our doors. Nonetheless, we need to step up to his request so the communities that we create feel safe and welcoming to everyone who accepts his invitation to the holy banquet. We won't always succeed – even the great King David missed the mark. When he mourned for Absalom, perhaps he also mourned for his failures and lost innocence. We have our own shortcomings, which means we’re in no position to decide who does and doesn’t belong in the Christian community. As the Bread of Life and our heavenly king, Jesus is entitled to invite all kinds of people to his table, and he doesn’t have to justify his guest list to us. Our job as his Father’s beloved children is not to judge or reject them, but to do our best Jesus imitation, and lovingly make his guests as welcome as we can. Amen.