Rising from our Wounds
2 Samuel 13-18, 2 Corinthians 5:17

A Sermon
Delivered by
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Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in Your sight O Lord our Strength and Redeemer, Amen.

It has been a tremendous honor to preach in this chapel these last 3 years. I think I’ve preached here 35 times which is more than any chaplain could ever ask for – and for that I’m very grateful. I’ve often felt that preaching here is in some sense like preaching to the very soul of the Navy – the history and tradition of this place, the convergence of faith and leadership that’s here. And yet, it’s the souls of people to whom we really preach. As a congregation, you have been an immense blessing. You might not realize this, but you actually preach to me. And I’m sure all of our chaplains feel this way. Your countenance and the light on your faces, as we stand here Sunday after Sunday are a reflection of the Holy Spirit and all that God is doing in our midst. And I pray that what goes on here might spill out these brass doors into this institution and ultimately our nation. “For righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people” (Proverbs 14:34). Thank you for being such a blessing to me and our family.

Some years ago on the floor of Congress a senator told a true story of an event that had occurred in a federal prison. Mother’s day was fast approaching, and a prison chaplain came up with the great idea of helping the inmates honor their mothers. The chaplain reached out to a greeting card company who had agreed to provide Mother’s Day cards free-of-charge for all the men. All the inmates had to do was pick the card up from the chaplain, write a note, and mail it off in a pre-stamped envelope. When the day came, it was a resounding success. More than 500 men showed up to mail a card to their moms. Inspired by the success of this effort, the chaplain decided he would do the very same thing for Father’s Day. So the day approached, flyers and announcements were posted, the tables were set up, and the cards were set out…Not a single man showed up to mail a card to his father. Not one.

The failure of the father impacts the son.

Our scripture today is the story of the death of Absalom, King David’s son. And it deals with this very reality: how the failure of one generation impacts the next. I have to say, this text is a challenging text to preach from as a final sermon. Nevertheless it is the reading for today; and as such I believe it brings a timely word spoken in season that many of us need to hear. Specifically it speaks to the wounds that each of us carry, and how God can lift us up from our wounds to walk in newness of life. The story is both brutal and tragic and actually begins back in 2nd Samuel 13. It’s important that we understand the events. Among King David’s
several children, Amnon was his oldest. But Amnon did the unthinkable – he fell love with his half-sister, Tamar. Tamar was also David’s child, but of a different mother; and Tamar was beautiful. Pretending to be ill, Amnon calls for Tamar to come into his chambers under the pretense that he needed her care. When she comes to his aid, Amnon forces himself upon her...“No my brother, do not violate me,” she cries out. “For such a thing is not done in Israel.” But Amnon proceeds to take advantage of Tamar, and rapes her. Making it worse, after this terrible act, we’re told that Amnon “hated and despised” Tamar. You might say, he got what he wanted and then discarded her. Thus, shamed, violated and humiliated, Tamar covers her head with ashes, tears her clothes, and goes out weeping.

Well when Absalom hears of this, he’s outraged. Absalom is Tamar’s full brother and he loves her as a brother. He cannot believe what Amnon has done; the shame he’s brought upon the family. Surely, Absalom reasons, surely their father, the good and godly King David will do something. Surely David will step in save the honor of his daughter. But shockingly, King David does nothing. Good, godly, upright King David is powerless to act. Rather than dealing with the scandal, David disengages and detaches altogether - retreating to his own issues and his own life. David does nothing. You see as good and godly as he was, David is a weakened King. I don’t mean weak in the sense of his military prowess or office. But his character, his internal resources, his capacity to be deal with sin had been blunted. It’s almost certain that David didn’t act because he was still living under the shadow of the wrong he had committed many years earlier.

We remember the story. David committed adultery and murder. He’d taken what wasn’t his and then destroyed an innocent man. And although these sins were egregious, they were forgiven. They were. And yet these failures clearly loomed large in David’s life. We can almost hear David saying to himself, “What right do I have to step in and address this evil? How can I claim any leverage or moral standing to act? “How can I punish Amnon, or say anything to him, when I too have done such unspeakable things?” David is an example of a man living, not in the light of God’s forgiveness, but in the shadow of a past that still dominates him. And don’t we do this at times? How often do you and I not act when we should, or disengage because we don’t feel like we have the moral standing to say anything or do anything? And yet when we acknowledge our wrong doing and confess our sins, we really are forgiven. God does not put us on probation, but restores us to a right relationship with himself. David should’ve known this. David who cried out in Psalm 51, “Create in me a clean heart O God…” But he’d forgotten this promise as we often do. Paralyzed by his past, he does not act. So Absalom does! He takes matters into his own hands, and kills Amnon. And thus begins the downward spiral of internal anger that defines Absalom’s life. As boys almost always do when issues aren’t resolved, Absalom begins to act out of his anger. He turns against his father. If his father won’t make things right, he will. And so he plots the overthrow of King David.

This is where our story brings us today. The conflict has come to a head. The armies of Absalom have gone out in battle against the armies of King David. It’s a macromos of a fractured relationship played out on a national scale. Although Absalom brings a great army, his men are no match for David’s, and they suffer a terrible defeat. 20,000 fall by the sword and Absalom has to flee for his life in the forest. But he doesn’t get far. You see Absalom had a full head of hair that was known throughout the land as a symbol of his strength and prowess. As he rides under an oak tree, his hair gets caught in the branches, leaving him suspended and in peril for his life. Imagine the scene: hanging there between heaven and earth, and unable to defend himself, Absalom has been caught in the consequences of a tragedy that didn’t have to be. David’s men are quick to kill
him. After David receives news of his death, the father, the grief-stricken father, feeling the weight of the passing of years and all that could’ve been, cries: “O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you. O Absalom my son, my son.”

The absence or lack of engagement of the father or the parent matters. It sets the stage for bad decisions, makes anger easier, can drive young men and women inward and then outward in harmful behavior; it creates wounds. Now why do I share this? Let me just say, this is not a sermon on parenting. Quite the contrary. I share this because in some sense we are all Absalom. We are all to a degree – more or less – wounded. There’s a great scene in the movie Gladiator that brings this point out vividly. Toward the end of the movie, Russell Crowe, who plays Maximus Decimus Meridias, is bound and chained below the Roman Coliseum waiting to fight the evil Emperor Commodus. Commodus knows that Maximus is a far greater warrior and knows that he’ll be killed if the tables are even. So he goes down to speak with Maximus before the fight. As he pulls Maximus close to him, he plunges a dagger into his side, delivering what will become a mortal wound. Then he tells the guard to cover the wound with armor, so no one will know. So Maximus goes out to meet his enemy in front of the whole coliseum, but beneath his armor is an awful wound, unseen by others, crippling him in his ability to fight. The scene is powerful and telling.

All of us, no matter who we are, have been delivered a wound of some kind or another. All of us, step into the arena of life with things not completely right, some area of our life not completely whole, some need unmet or unanswered, something un-affirmed, longing for blessing. Some of our wounds are visible; but many are not. Frederick Buechner was 10 years old when his father committed suicide. It happened on a Saturday morning in the fall when his dad was supposed to have taken him and his brother to a football game. Years later Buechner wrote: A child takes life as it comes because he has no other way of taking it. The world came to an end that Saturday morning…it’s like when your house burns down, it isn’t for years that you realize the full extent of your loss.

It’s so true: As children, we take life just as it comes, with its blessings and good things…and its difficulties, hardships, and dysfunctions. It’s often not until much later that we begin to realize there have been losses…wounds. Some of you grew up where one or more parents was silent or just not available when you needed them to affirm you. At a critical time in your life when you needed the blessing or affirmation of a father or mother, it wasn’t there. Some of you grew up in abusive situations or where derision or mockery was common – the grammar of your household; where you were made to feel less than adequate. And this message of inadequacy still speaks to you. Others of you grew up in very driven homes – where you felt loved - but only if you made good grades or did well in sports. And so you have an insatiable desire to perform or achieve for fear that if you don’t, you won’t be loved. Many of you grew up in a divorced home, where instability was your “daily bread,” or where one parent, often the father – just wasn’t there, absent or not engaged; not there to speak blessing into your life, not there to tell you, “well-done.” Even if you came from a good and godly family…it wasn’t all perfect. Charity and I on several occasions have looked to each other as parents and said, “We are really messing up our kids.” 😋 Haven’t all parents felt this? We are all like Absalom (parents too): wounded and not whole, reacting from something that was missed in our lives; the product of fallen people: sons of Adam, daughters of Eve. And so we step out into the arena of life, and our armor is on, but the wound is there and it’s real. So what do we do?
What most of us do is try and heal these wounds on our own. We become driven to succeed hoping that accomplishments will finally bring the blessing and affirmation we've wanted from our parents or father. We seek affection in the wrong places. We seek the approval of others at all costs. We lash out at authority. Or we go inward and become depressed, even paralyzed. But no matter how hard we try, the wound seems incurable. When I was in 10th grade, my father gave me something that I will never forget. It was a small thing, but not small to the heart of a teenage boy. I was entering high school and wanted to play varsity football. An announcement had gone out that all those who were interested in playing football were invited to the bleachers at the high school stadium for an informational meeting with the head coach. We were to bring a parent. So I brought my dad. I was already nervous. I wasn’t very big and I just knew the girls were going to be huge. Well, when I got there and all the dads and sons sat down, my greatest fears were realized. These guys were huge and old. I was 15 and many of them were 17 or 18...some were 19 - already shaving. And here I was an average sized guy at best and new to the school. The meeting came and went and after it was over, I just sat there on the bleachers, thinking there’s no way I can do this. My dad must’ve perceived this was going on in me and that this was a critical opportunity to speak a word into my life, because he leaned over, smiling and said, “Carey, I think you have what it takes. You’re just as tough as any guy out here. And you can do this.”

My Dad has no idea what he gave me that day. It wasn’t about football. It was about a father’s love and blessing. He was telling me that he believed in me, he loved me, and saw in me what I didn’t see in myself. This is the answer to the wound: the voice of the Father who will never leave you or forsake you, the father who loves you, who will never disengage or detach from you, who has loved you from the foundations of the world. Today right here in this place he says to you: “You can do this...you have what it takes.” “You are the very apple of my eye, my child in whom I delight. You’re mine.” Through the gift of the cross he says “You’re loved and esteemed from all eternity, you were engraved on palms of my hands, AND YOU MATTER.” This is why the Apostle Paul, who himself struggled with great regrets and wounds in his own life could say: “Forgetting what lies behind I reach forward to what lies ahead, pressing on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” In Jesus Christ, the sins of the fathers are cancelled once and for all. They’re done away with and cast into the depths of the sea. “For if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold all things have become new” (2 Cor. 5:17)

That we’ve all been wounded is certain. The only question is: Are you living in the shadow of those wounds? Maybe you’re like David, paralyzed by past failures? You need to remember you are forgiven. Psalm 103 says: “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.” Many of us are like Absalom, wounded by the failures of others, longing for a blessing or a relationship that was strained or absent. Let the Father speak into your wounds today. He says: You are loved, you are cherished, and you belong to Me. And you don’t have to walk through life wounded anymore. Thanks be to God for his unfailing love. And thanks be to God for the most indescribable gift of his Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.