

Sermon for August 9, 2015 (Proper 14, Year B)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: 2 Samuel 18:5-9,15,31-33; Psalm 130; John 6:35,41-51, BAPTISM
Know what: David failed to serve his family and others; Jesus is our example
So what: the purpose of human life is to serve one another and creation
Now what: figure out how God wants you to lead others to success
Title: For the Life of the World

There's a big difference between winners and losers. At least, that's what Donald Trump believes, as he has explained very clearly to all of us! History tells us, however, that those with wealth and power nearly always are portrayed as the winners.

In this sense, my friends, it is quite ironic that King David has been lionized in history as the King of Israel par excellence. Well, he did have wealth and power.

But, truth be told, the story of David is mostly a story of failure. In his most important relationships in life, he completely lost his way.

Allow me briefly to recap his story for you, at least as it relates to his family and his friends.

David was a powerful young warrior who gathered around him an extremely loyal band of warriors. He and his men were in conflict with King Saul for a number of years, until – finally – Saul was defeated.

Once firmly established as King with sufficient tribute coming in, David settled in to the life of royalty in Jerusalem and commissioned his loyal warriors to act as his generals out in the field and to do his fighting for him. It seems that they did not look kindly upon this domestication of their old friend.

As you can imagine, the principle of primogeniture was of paramount importance in ancient monarchies, and David's was no exception.

But here, David had a major problem. His **first-born** son, Amnon, went astray. He violated Tamar, David's daughter and his own half-sister Tamar.

Revenge was visited upon him by the ambitious third son of David named Absalom. The second-son of David is hardly ever mentioned – I guess that he had no stomach for or interest in royal power.

But Absalom surely did, and he killed the heir to the throne – his brother – in cold blood. It seems that Absalom was never able to forgive his father for failing to protect or avenge the violation of Tamar. So he took matters into his own hands. After this, Absalom fled and for 5 years, he and his father did not speak or see each other.

And all this time, what did David do to bring order back to his house, to mend fences with his children? Nothing. Nothing at all.

Even at this point of the story which he heard today, when Absalom has charged forward into outright revolt against his father's throne and civil war is at hand, David is too comfortable at home to go out and face his son directly.

Once again, he sends his trusted commanders out to risk their own lives in order to take care of his rebellious son on his behalf.

Twenty thousand warriors are killed, because this father could not – or would not – communicate clearly and directly with his own son. And they all knew it.

So when David orders them not to do any harm to Absalom, this is just icing on the cake. Now, they revolt as well, and Absalom is killed without remorse.

Like a frightened child, David sits at home and waits to hear of the outcome of the battle.

Does he congratulate his warriors for their resolve and resilience in a difficult battle? Does he mourn the unnecessary deaths of 20,000 of his own people, his fellow Israelites?

None of these. David weeps, but only for himself. Only over his own pain.

Let me ask you this: is this how a leader acts?

No. David lost his way. And he failed to understand the very purpose for which he was chosen and anointed as King over the people.

Jim Collins is the brilliant researcher who is obsessed with understanding why some people and organizations succeed while others fail in the same environment. On Thursday, I heard him speak about his one year serving as Chair for the Study of Leadership at West Point.

He spoke at length about the model of success in the Army being built around the success of the Unit. Individuals can only succeed in the Army if the entire Unit succeeds.

He capped off his talk by sharing the story of his wife. Jim Collins is married to Joanne Ernst. She is a world-class triathlete, but when she was on the track team at Fairview High School in Boulder, Colorado she struggled and was clearly frustrated by her inability to compete well – despite her best efforts. Her coach at Fairview noticed her frustration and one day he handed her a note which simply said, “Your time will come.”

It sure did. Fast forward about 12 years. In 1985 Joanne was at the peak of her performance. So Joanne entered the Ironman Triathlon competition in Hawaii as a clear favorite to win. As you probably know, triathlons always begin with the swim, move on to the cycling component, and end with the running – in this case, a full marathon in the blazing tropical heat.

Joanne was incredibly fit, but she had had an injury to her legs a few months before the Ironman which reared its ugly head during the run. She had a comfortable 10 minute lead near the middle of the marathon, but with 10 miles to go she was losing about a minute per mile off of her lead. This math is pretty simple.

It became so difficult for Joanne that at one point that she had to stop entirely and pound on her quads. She kept going and she was the first to cross the finish line by 93 seconds – a tiny margin when you consider that the entire race took more than 10 hours and 25 minutes to complete!

But do you know what surprised both Joanne and her husband Jim the most after she won the Ironman? It did not make her happy. Exhausted, to be sure. But there

was no sudden onset of contentment or deep happiness that came into her life after this victory.

A few years later, back in their hometown of Boulder, Joanne had the opportunity to become head coach of both the girls AND boys cross-country running teams at her own high school, Fairview High. Working with the talent that was present in the school, Coach Ernst pulled off an amazing feat. In 2001, her teams capped off a few years of increasing success by BOTH winning their respective state titles.

Her time had come, indeed. And then, finally, Joanne was happy. She knew that she had accomplished something important in life by helping these young people to experience the joy of accomplishing a difficult task together.

My friends, individual achievement is never sufficient. We are made to help others succeed. We are here to serve others by leading them to excellence.

David completely lost sight of the goal. Wealth and power and comfort had distorted his vision.

David lost sight of the reality that there was no individual success for himself apart from the success of his family, apart from the success of his closest friends and counselors, and apart from the success of his people, his nation.

But instead of investing in the next generation, instead of empowering his circle of loyal friends, instead of building up his nation, he ignored his children, he used and abused his friends, and he forgot about his nation.

Thanks be to God that we have the perfect contrast to that self-centered pattern in the attitude and behavior of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He is called the Son of David. And where David got it wrong, THIS Son got it right!

What is it that we heard proclaimed in the Gospel today?

“The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (John 6:51).

Jesus poured himself out on behalf of others, not because he could. Not because he had wealth or power, but because this is the purpose of human life!

Jesus lived the fullest, most complete human life because he lived for others, “for the life of the world”.

This is the question: how will you use your current situation to improve the lives of others? How will you use your income, your home, your lake house or mountain condo, your boat, your skills and expertise, your time, your knowledge, your creativity – WHATEVER it is that you have within the circle of your life right now, how will you use it NOT simply for your own comfort and pleasure, but to improve the lives of others? To empower others? To enable others to succeed?

The celebration of Baptism is one way in which we embody this calling and put it into practice. What we have received, we pass along and share with the next generation.

Because we know that there is no measure of success for us here that fails to include empowering the next generation with the amazing truth of God-with-us, God-for-us, God-feeding-us, God-living-among-us.

Right now, how are you being called to manifest this commitment to others in your life? May the Holy Spirit guide you in all your ways. Amen.