

A Parent's Love

2 Samuel 18; Ephesians 4:25-5:2

From the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
12th Sunday after Pentecost, August 12, 2018
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The Battle of the Bulge began in the forested Ardennes, in Belgium and France on December 16th, 1944. There were nearly 90,000 American casualties—over 19,000 killed and 47,000 wounded. These are incomprehensible, big, big numbers, the biggest in terms of American losses in a single battle in all of WWII. My dad—William P. Matthews—was among the 23,554 listed as captured or missing.¹ Dad told me that as American POWs were corralled and marched into Germany, many died of starvation, dysentery, exposure to the bitter cold, and exhaustion; to the northeast a few clicks from Schoenburg Road to St. Vith near where Dad was captured, in a field near Malmady, about 81 American POWs were executed in cold blood.

Joseph and Alice Matthews received the news of their son by mail from the U.S. War Department, delivered to their home at 68 Cherokee Road, in Hampton. I cannot imagine the heaviness of that father and mother's heart. To hear such unthinkable news. *Missing in Action*. An ocean and half a continent away. "O Billy Boy, O Billy."

Sound familiar?

King David's men had won the terrible battle in the forest of Ephraim, but it came at high cost: 20,000 dead. We read that "the forest consumed more soldiers than the sword." Many, apparently, simply died in the wilderness.

Not much has changed about battle. There is the wildness of battle, and then the wilderness in battle's aftermath.² Our troops have come home from all our wars wounded in body, mind, and soul.

The forest is dangerous. Still.

And there is King David. He weeps when he hears about his son, killed in battle. His are among the most heart-rending words in the Bible. "My son, Absalom! My son, my son, Absalom! If only I could have died in your place! Absalom, my son, my son!"

I've heard husbands say that about their wives, "If only I could have died in her place!" I've heard parents say similar things about their children: "If only I could bear their pain. If only I could make it better."

¹ US Department of Defense numbers vary widely.

² Thirteen days ago marked the 73rd anniversary of sinking of the USS Indianapolis by a Japanese submarine. My friend Jay, a sailor on the USS Doyle, manned a whale boat and searched those oil-slick, shark-infested waters for survivors, plucking dozens to safety. On his deathbed he still vividly remembered the starving men he helped to save. Jay carried memory of the war with him everyday, everywhere. Like a lot of our veterans who have experienced the wilderness of war, he never, really, was free from its dark shadow.

Absalom, my son, my son.

It didn't matter that Absalom and David had been estranged. It didn't matter that Absalom had named himself King in nearby Hebron. It didn't matter that Absalom was the product of a politically arranged marriage, and it didn't even matter that Absalom had plotted to kill David. Absalom was still David's son, and David still lamented Absalom's death.

My son, my son.

* * *

The Bible is the story of how strong God's love is for his creation, for us. The prophet Zechariah reminds us that we are "the apple of God's eye" (Zechariah 2:8). In a letter written by John, we read, "See what love the father has for us that we should be called children of God. And so we are." Paul talks about our being adopted by God despite our waywardness. Jesus promises he'll never leave his friends orphaned."

The point is this: God has chosen us, and loves us—even tough we don't deserve it, even though we often plot against God's ways, even though we sometimes ignore God's call to do justice. We are still God's children, no matter what.

How many times has our heavenly parent wept over us? Is it difficult to imagine that the God who loves us hurts when we hurt, weeps when we weep? Is it difficult to imagine the shepherd lamenting when one member of the flock gets lost in the wilderness?

There is nothing like *this* parent's love.

My child, my child.

And this is the love Jesus came to remind us of. *For God so loved the world . . .* listen to the words from Ephesians today: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us."

The wilderness is lonely and dangerous. We are tested in the wilderness. If we survive it, we come out changed—stronger perhaps—but different. The wilderness is dark at night, very dark, and it's easy to get lost. The forest is thick. *God's love is bright enough to light the way out.*

Given how dangerous life can be, Paul urges the church at Ephesus to stay focused on God's love no matter what. "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you."

Imitate this love, Paul urges. Live in this love. Be guided by this love. The activities of your church—things like Game Night and The Big Event—are not entertainments for us simply to enjoy. These are attempts of your church to practice imitating God's love and delight, to live God's love in the world, to bear God's love to the world. We aren't called to be spectators. This isn't a cruise ship. This is God's church, and we are called to be disciples.

Paul reminds us often that Christ loved us all the way to the cross. Be mindful, then, of this sacrificial, *all-the-way* kind of love. God's love is the kind of love that straightens out a path through the wilderness. God's love is the kind of love that finds the missing in action. God's love is the kind of love that raises up the dead. God's love is the kind of love that brings peace to the battle weary—God knows how they deserve it. God's love is the kind of love that mends and sustains and redeems. God's love is the kind of love that can heal even King David's broken heart.

And ours. Even ours.

Alleluia.

AMEN