

“Let’s kill his name!” 2 Samuel 15:1-6

“After this Absalom got himself a chariot and horses, and fifty men to run before him. And Absalom used to rise early and stand beside the way of the gate. And when any man had a dispute to come before the king for judgment, Absalom would call to him and say, “From what city are you?” And when he said, “Your servant is of such and such a tribe in Israel,” Absalom would say to him, “See, your claims are good and right, but there is no man designated by the king to hear you.” Then Absalom would say, “Oh that I were judge in the land! Then every man with a dispute or cause might come to me, and I would give him justice.” And whenever a man came near to pay homage to him, he would put out his hand and take hold of him and kiss him. Thus, Absalom did to all of Israel who came to the king for judgment. So, Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Today for our mediation we have one of those gut-wrenching, sick-in-the-stomach making Biblical accounts which are so full of injustice that they resonate deep down in our hearts. How David’s son Absalom stole the hearts of men of Israel.

Why this account today? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit? Sure, that’s what we all say every Sunday. Do you believe that the Holy Spirit is living and active in Christ’s Church? Sure, how can we say the opposite.

Do you believe that the Holy Spirit engages with us, trying to guide and move us to do certain things? Sometimes speaking directly to us is a way that we can actually hear His message if not with our ears, then at least with our hearts? Do you?

One of my fellow pastors whom I value and appreciate, is very open that that is how he leads his life and his ministry. That every day he listens to what the Holy Spirit tells him to do, and that is what he does.

I have been shy to ask him directly - how exactly do you hear it, how do you know? I guess I was hesitant to ask so that he didn’t think that I was doubting what he was saying. And I certainly was. Doubting. Still am.

But then last year around this time for several weeks, whenever I got to prepare the sermon of the next Sunday, I had those almost obsessive thoughts that I would need to preach on the 8th Commandment. That I need to preach on the 8th Commandment... That I need to preach on the 8th Commandment...

There was nothing in our lectionary fitting for such a topic. We were already entering the season of Lent, and somehow, I failed to listen to that voice. Some of you know more, some of you know less, but you would have noticed that something very unpleasant was happening and probably still is happening in our congregation, not openly, but sort of bubbling under the surface.

I am wondering, if I had listened to that voice, how much different things could have been. We all make mistakes. This is not a competition, of course, but I make a lot of mistakes. Now I want to preach on the 8th Commandment, that voice still says that I need to do that. That’s why today’s event with Absalom.

Let's read it once again. **"Absalom used to rise early and stand beside the way of the gate. And when any man had a dispute to come before the king for judgment, Absalom would call to him and say, "From what city are you?" And when he said, "Your servant is of such and such a tribe in Israel," Absalom would say to him, "See, your claims are good and right, but there is no man designated by the king to hear you." Then Absalom would say, "Oh that I were judge in the land! Then every man with a dispute or cause might come to me, and I would give him justice." And whenever a man came near to pay homage to him, he would put out his hand and take hold of him and kiss him. Thus, Absalom did to all of Israel who came to the king for judgment. So, Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel."**

If you have read this account before, if you know what tragedies happened before and what devastation transpired after as the consequence of Absalom's treacherous actions, you would recognize how much we can learn from this event.

That is why... we will have not one, but at least two sermons on this passage. Yes, two! Not today. One today and one in a couple weeks' time. Today we will try to understand what was happening, why it was so wrong, how the Ten Commandments help us to understand this event and open for us God's wisdom.

And then in the second sermon we will reflect on the power of our words.

Let's see, what was going on? All these events took place during the reign of king David. The whole story of David is so encouraging for us. He was a king "after God's own heart", trusting his Lord, always seeking God's will and guidance, above all trying to please God and not people.

That is why king David is remembered as a golden standard among Israel's kings, everyone after him was compared with David. That is why David's reign was remembered as a time of justice for all his subjects.

At the same time, as the Spirit reveals to us, king David managed to fail his Lord spectacularly, he committed some of the most shameful actions in the history of God's people - committing adultery with the wife of one of his most committed military leaders, Uriah the Hittite, and then commanding to murder him to cover the ugliness of what he had done.

While a golden standard as a king of Israel, David's family life was a mess. Multiple wives and concubines. Children from different mothers. Absalom's half brother Amnon had raped and then abandoned Absalom's sister Tamar.

Absalom then went to avenge his sister and slaughtered Amnon when he expected it the least. He then had to run until he was able to return to Jerusalem a few years later. That's when the events of today's reading unfolded.

What do we have? We have King David. A man after God's own heart. Just king, fair king who trusts His Lord and tries to serve as faithfully as he can. We have his subjects who know that he is a trustworthy king and they come to him from afar to seek justice for themselves. They obviously trusted king David.

And then we have David's son Absalom. He had suffered injustice done to his sister, sure. For two years he had plotted his revenge and done it. He had spent some time in exile. King David had pardoned him and allowed him to live in Jerusalem.

What does he do now? He inserts himself between the king and his people. He places himself at the gates of the city. **“And when any man had a dispute to come before the king for judgment, Absalom would call to him and say, “From what city are you? [...] See, your claims are good and right, but there is no man designated by the king to hear you.”** Was he speaking the truth? No!

Was he authorized to do any of that, was it his role to engage with those men? No! Remember what the 4th Commandment instructs us? **“Honor your father and your mother. What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we do not despise or anger our parents and other authorities, but honour them, serve and obey them, love and cherish them.”**

Was Absalom trying to serve and obey, to love and cherish his father, the king? Was he trying to improve the situation in his father's kingdom? Whose interests was Absalom serving? His fathers? People's interest? No, his own!

What was his motivation? We can only guess. Revenge, envy, thirst of power, maybe low self-esteem as psychologists would say, maybe he wanted to feel more significant. We don't know. Perhaps, a bit of everything. Anyhow, that may explain, but none of that justifies what he was doing.

He was sinning against God, disobeying His commandments, he was sinning against his father and the king, he was sinning against those men who came to seek justice, by giving false testimonies and driving a wedge between them and their righteous king David. He was preparing a coup and promoting himself as a king. Treacherously, behind the back of his father and king.

What about those men who came to King David looking for justice? Were they some ill-willed conspirators? Not at all. Trusting subjects of the king David. Tricked and deceived by Absalom. He had a very pleasant and attractive personality.

Look how he behaved! He was speaking with them kindly, assuring that he cares for them and their cause, gaining their trust so that he can manipulate them for his own purposes. **“Whenever a man came near to pay homage to him, he would put out his hand and take hold of him and kiss him.”** What a lovely, friendly and caring guy! So welcoming, who wouldn't trust him! Maybe even too good to be true...

What could those men have done differently? Perhaps, they could have asked some simple questions. Why is this person so overly friendly? Is that true what he is saying? Shall we verify it? They could have stood up for their king, they could have rebuked and silenced Absalom. But... they didn't.

We know how the story went. Many believed him. So many were deceived and rose against king David. Not even realizing that they were manipulated. Or maybe they wanted to believe that king David wasn't good enough.

This is a tragic story. Because of Absalom's deception many and many lost their lives, families lost husbands, fathers, providers, and the future. It was impossible to reverse what was done. **“Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel.”**

As Christians we are so blessed, especially in our Lutheran tradition, where we have received such a wonderful exposition of the Ten Commandments. We can learn and understand how our all-wise God has ordered our lives in community.

4th Commandments instruct us to honour, serve, obey, love and cherish those whom the Lord has given us to care for us, all in the office of parents, our leaders, teachers, pastors. 8th Commandment instructs us:

“You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour. *What does this mean?* We should fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbour, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way.”

The Commandments help us to understand what was so wrong in that account. Why do we feel with our guts that terrible injustice was done. But that story is not unique. Our lives are trashed with similar stories. It happens in the world, it happens in the Church, and our congregation has by no means been spared of this.

Of course, because we all fail! We fail to honor and serve, obey, love and cherish. We all do. And then gossip... What can be sweeter than that! There are always some failings, some imperfections, some mistakes in everyone. How sweet it is to point them out, to discuss others, for in some twisted way we then feel that we are elevating ourselves, that we are better, not like that person. We all suffer from this.

It is a wonderful blessing when the Word of God reveals to us the will of God, His wise design for our lives. It helps us to recognize when someone does what Absalom did and not be manipulated. It equips us to discern what is happening and inspires us to have courage to stand for what is right and true. But... it is not enough to know what God's will is. It is not enough to understand the wisdom given to us in the Commandments.

We need more. So much more. We need God's help, we need Jesus, we need what He brings. We all have sinned just as Absalom did, just as those men did and we can't even know how much harm our sins have done, how far reaching the consequences are. We all are in desperate need of God's forgiveness.

But there was One who was falsely accused while being completely innocent. He was accused and He was executed without proper trial, without a single shred of evidence, without guilt. He was given into death because of the envy and jealousy of others, because His light exposed their darkness.

He didn't seek revenge. He didn't even resist. He went as a lamb. More than that, He took all the false testimonies that we have ever made and will make and He nailed them to the cross. Together with His innocent and beaten to death body.

Then He rose again. In His innocent body having received all God's wrath for the sin of the world. His name is Jesus. Your Saviour. And now He invites us, He invites you:

“Throw everything at me, throw at me your sin, your lack of respect, obedience, love, your gossiping, your shame, your guilt, your guilty conscience...”

I will take them from you, and I will give you something better instead. I will forgive you all your sins. Be at peace. Have a good conscience. Receive my Spirit, I am sending Him to you, may He renew and restore you, and may He give you strength and courage to mend what your sins have broken. This is a good deal. Take it!”

That is His gift to us. That is Jesus' gift to you.

Take it! Receive it with grateful hearts. Cherish it. Use it wisely. Amen.