

How the mighty have fallen
in the midst of the battle!

Jonathan lies slain upon your high places.
I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;

greatly beloved were you to me;
your love to me was wonderful,
passing the love of women.

During the summer I did Clinical Pastoral Education, one of my patients was a Vietnam vet, a long-haired scruffy man of the 1960's, transferred from the VA to Mt. Zion Hospital for a week of special treatments the nature of which I have quite forgotten if I ever knew, because he, in all his pain, confusion, and suffering, was so much more compelling than anything that might be wrong with him. Both during and after the war, he'd taken just about every drug out there, and his speech was more dreamlike than linear, leading me into a mythical landscape of battle, betrayal, and fear which opened the doors of my own suffering. (I did not know that then, for in those days, I was trying to wallpaper my hurts with holiness.)

He was like a novel I could not put down, except that everything he said really happened. An innocent who'd seen it all and yet clung to the fragile threads of his innocence.

"You're one of the few who's been able to listen to me," he said.

"You cannot keep a story like that to yourself. It's an honor to listen to you," I answered.

"I couldn't believe it. I mean I just couldn't believe it. There was this moment that I suddenly realized that my country didn't love me."

"I don't know what to say."

We sat in silence, looking into each other's eyes.

"What's so compelling to you about this guy?" asked Rabbi Silberman, my supervisor, at our next meeting.

“He’s part of my history. He suffered so much. It is my holy duty to honor him.”

“Bullshit,” said the Rabbi.

And so we arrive, yet again, at the story of David and Jonathan. A lot has happened since they pledged their love to one another. Saul’s rage grew so murderous that David had to flee into exile. He had the chance to murder Saul as he slept inside a cave, but David refused to kill God’s anointed, doing nothing but leaving a tear in the king’s robe as a sign that he had been there. David finally took refuge among the Philistines, the historic enemy of his people, and even offered to join them in their campaign against Saul but was denied. Despite his oaths of fealty, the king’s officers didn’t trust him, and he was sent away, as it turned out, to wage war against the Amalekites, who, in David and his army’s absence, had raided their camp at Ziklag.

As David battled Amalekites, the Philistines conquered Israel, recapturing almost all the land that Saul had captured from them, leaving both Saul and his sons Jonathan, Abinadab, and Malchishua dead on Mt. Gilboa, the sons killed in battle, Saul impaled by falling on his own sword.

Three days later, an Amalekite messenger arrived to tell David that he came upon Saul on the mountain leaning upon his spear and having convulsions, and that Saul commanded him to put him out of his misery, which he did, and here are his crown and his armlet to prove it. Hoping to receive a reward for dispatching David’s royal enemy, the messenger was instead put to death for doing what David himself had refused to do: killing the Lord’s anointed.

Only then does the dirge we read today begin.

The commentaries all seem to accept David’s grief at face value; Despite the fact that Saul tried repeatedly to kill him, David was truly lamenting the King of Israel, the mighty one who fell at the pinnacle. They praised the purity of David’s love for both Saul and Jonathan,

which finds its echo in the New Testament when Jesus tells us not only to love our friends, but to love our enemies. Some have approached it as a work of poetry, distinguishing it from a psalm because it nowhere mentioned God, and reminding us that David was both musician and poet. The Jewish Study Bible tells us that typically dirges were sung by women, giving us another glimpse at David's possible androgyny.

But it was also a work of political genius. These people were my family, David sang. Jonathan was my brother. I am the heir.

I wanted to be cynical about all this. I wanted to paint David, perhaps not in Machiavellian terms, but certainly in pragmatic ones, and show how well he marketed himself, I even wanted to question the purity of his love for Jonathan,

greatly beloved were you *to me*;
your love *to me* was wonderful
passing the love of women

Did David love Jonathan as much as Jonathan loved David? We'll never know.

But the longer I sat with these and other snarky interpretations, I found that just as David couldn't curse Saul, I couldn't curse David. Not now. Not in my own land, which is choking on accusation, cynicism, and self-righteousness.

Because there is one thing in this story that rises above all the complicated rest. David chose unity over division. David killed the Amalekite messenger who thought to prosper by claiming to have killed the man who wanted David dead. David responded by saying *I am not at war against my own people, and you cannot bribe me. We are not a house divided. We are the Lord's anointed, and Saul was my king whether I liked him or not.*

Again, while it is often difficult to read the story of David because it contains so much violence, Jesus' themes keep reappearing: this time, the teaching of the dangers of factionalism, which we heard in church not long ago, "A Kingdom divided against itself cannot stand."

If Saul had divided his kingdom, it was now up to David to bring it back together.

Just as we, in these difficult times, are called to make our own deeply divided nation whole.

And here, again, is the beauty of the David story. It is not easy. It is not always right, but David is not a charismatic autocrat full of easy answers telling his people to go have fun and leave it to me. He was not the plundering king about whom Samuel warned us, taking our sons and daughters and turning them into royal warriors and perfumers. David always sought the love of his people. David had the qualities of the macho fighter and the gentle, more feminine singer. Most, but not all, of the time, David listened to God.

Political discourse, like religious discourse, always flirts with the temptation of absolutism. My agenda, my religion is the only one. There is no room for darkness in my true light; criticism is blasphemy. Slavery, slaughter of our Native peoples, supremacy of gender and skin color to these people was necessary and right. Remember the old bumper stickers: America: Love it or Leave It?

Too easily do we forget that John the Baptist arrived to tell us that we cannot be saved unless we repent. We cannot love truly unless we truly know whom we are loving, flaws and all.

God does not favor those who cover up their faults.

The Bible gives me a story of a deeply troubled humanity and tells me that we are blessed. The Bible is the narrative of a people's 2,000-year-old relationship with the God who created them and gave them the freedom to discover who they are. The Bible is a 2,000-year-old

love story. God's love and God's presence give us the courage to step outside the narrow confines of self-interest and find wisdom in those with whom we disagree. God also gives us the courage to quietly, and non-violently, represent truth in a culture's house of lies.

This week we will celebrate Independence Day. Our nation was born as a house divided from the nation that used us as a colonial resource. We were never a Christian Nation, although we have always had pockets of great and transformative faith. We did some things very right. We did some things very wrong. Thomas Jefferson gave himself permission to rewrite the New Testament in his own image.

There is so much more I want to share with you, but I cannot do so yet. I want you to ponder what you think before I tell you what I think. Meanwhile, I am planning to observe Independence Day as a day of prayer for a nation I love very much. I would hope, like my Vietnam vet, that this nation might love me back, but love is often the first thing to go when posturing and power struggles take the place of true governance. Jesus loved those who did not love him. And so must I.

In today's gospel, a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years touches Jesus' cloak and is instantly healed. David left a tear in Saul's cloak when he refused to murder God's anointed in his sleep. Let us wake up to the truth around us and stop the bleeding. Let us find healing in a torn corner of Jesus' cloak.

Of course, there's more to come. In Jesus' name, Amen.