

“Thus says the Lord: I will raise up trouble against you from within your own house.” (2 Samuel)

and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. (Matthew 10:34-36)

Just as I have cobbled a single sentence from the Second Book of Samuel and the Gospel of Matthew, there is not a tradition in the world that does not warn that when a family rises up against itself, the very world around it will fall. We read it in the Bible, Thucydides, Euripides, Confucius, the Qur’an. It was the great theme of the 1960’s youth uprising. It remains a source of conflict as authoritarian “family values” patriarchs contend with progressive visions of family diversity. Whatever your views, family is foundational to our understanding of what it means to be human. “Children, obey your parents,” say the authoritarians. “Children, question your parents,” say the progressives. Few say that we need to do both.

Today, we read a portion of one of the saddest of all family stories: the revolt of Absalom against his father David, the war which followed, and which would result, a generation later, in the permanent division between the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

Our reading begins with the rebellion’s ignominious end: “the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. The men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the slaughter there was great on that day, twenty thousand men. (Such carnage is sadly typical in civil wars.) The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword.”

The forest claimed more victims that day than the sword. A very rich aside. How did the forest kill? Wild animals? Snakes? Falling trees? Raging waters? Deep ravines? Whatever the literal details, it suggests that this final battle was not only between father and son, but between humans and nature as well.

“Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. His head caught fast in the oak, and he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on.

And ten young men, Joab’s armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him, and killed him.”

If this doesn’t haunt you just a little, it should. Not only is it a tragic reduction from strength to total helplessness, but the imagistic parallels with the Crucifixion are also unmistakable. Two beloved sons, hanging from trees, pierced by the sword, their father’s inconsolable grief. But the situations leading up to the deaths are entirely different. Jesus may have hung from a tree, but he did not rebel against his father. Jesus was executed for being a rebel, but he wasn’t a rebel, unless you think that making people whole is a rebellious act. He was pierced in the side, but this was not what killed him.

Jesus was the son of a virgin. In the David story, Absalom’s half-brother raped his virgin sister Tamar, whose cry echoes in my heart to this day, “These things are not done in Israel.” When Absalom sought satisfaction for his sister, their father did nothing about it. Jesus welcomed women into his circle of disciples. Perhaps after all he suffered over Bathsheba, David didn’t want to be bothered by women any more.

As I said, the content of these stories have nothing in common, but the confluence of their images make me stop and think. Strife among family members. A cursed death on a tree. Fathers and sons. The regard, or disregard, of women. Hold that thought.

Because there is a different family tradition, again in all the world’s religions, and that is the tradition, not of rebellion, but growth and individuation. We all need to leave home to find our true calling. Some return, some don’t. In this tradition, people like John the Baptist, Jesus

and Buddha leave their families, enter the forest, and wrestle, not with their parents, but with themselves, and become teachers of wisdom. And we ordinary children leave our families to find our own path, our own careers, our own marriage partners, our own new families.

Nor is the revolt between generations inevitable. It happens when the world around us is simmering like a restless pot, when violence is taken for granted and suffuses both the outer world and the inner psyche, when people value power more than life, when enslavement is normal, when the poor are oppressed as a matter of course, that is to say throughout all Western History since the rise of the Assyrian empire, since the moment when Gilgamesh and his best friend Enkidu killed Humbaba the guardian of the trees and decimated an entire forest of cedars to fuel their ambitions. Enkidu was killed by the wrath of the goddess and all the inner horror surrounding death was born.

One of the great differences between Western history and much of Asian history lies in their attitude toward war: in China, in India, war is seen as the failure of social practices and institutions, the decay of royal families, while war in European and American history is viewed as heroic.

Absalom hanging from a tree. Jesus on the cross. Both these images have many meanings, but one of them is that they compel us, if we dare, to look our culture of violence right in the eye. In a world where war is normal, there can be no "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom," for gentleness is not manly. Gentleness is not strong, and as the Bible says, Spring is the time of year when kings go to war. Contrary to the opinions of some, the Bible does not approve of all that is in it.

Rene Girard, a former professor at Stanford proposed a theory of violence based upon his experience as a teacher of literature. As he read Dostoevsky, he realized that the archetypal

pattern of European literature was conflict. And this led him to study the phenomenon of violence itself.

Theologian Justin Barkus writes: “Gerard ... observed that the more fiercely people or groups compete against each other, the more they become mirror images of each other, desiring the same exact things, competing for supremacy on every front, and behaving, valuing, and thinking increasingly alike. In Gerard’s theory of violence, desires for things like power, money, or superiority function as a twisted social fabric that stitches people together into common ambition, even as the lust for preeminence produces an ever simmering and sometimes eruptive hostility between people, groups, or nations.

“Jesus’ ... mission was to unstitch this fabric of competition and conquest.” (“Give us this Day,” August 9, 2024)

Today’s passage from the Letter to the Ephesians shows what Jesus’ way of peace looks like in daily life.

“Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. ...Have something to share with the needy. Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.” As we practice kind speech, as we listen to our anger without acting upon it, as we share what we have with the needy, we slowly change ourselves and as we change ourselves, we change the world.

For God is found in relationship. We are shaped by our experiences and our response to those experiences. We see God through the lens of these experiences. We live in a country where dysfunctional families are considered normal, a necessary evil of human nature. People point to

the Bible and say, “Look, families in the Bible were just as bad,” as if being in the Bible validated all kinds of negativity instead of calling us to look hard at what negativity does to human well-being, even sanity. Angry people call God a judge and a warrior. People who have found peace see only the way of love. Dysfunctional families are anything but par for the course: they are the outward and visible sign of a culture built on fear, war, and violence, which having gone to the heart of those who must cope with these things, bears fruit in acts of abuse.

Jesus says we don’t have to bear those fruits. We can transform pain into compassion. We can, as he did, lay hands of love upon a traumatized world.

Next week, we’ll see how our and their culture of violence affects the way we understand Jesus’ teaching in John, Chapter 6, which has been going on quietly for weeks, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life.”

Here's a hint from the Gospel of Thomas:

“Whoever lives the interpretation of these words
Will no longer taste death.” Amen.