8-9-15

“Absalom, Absalom!”

Scriptures:

2 Samuel 18

Ps. 102

John 6

Many of you will know the name, William Faulkner. He is perhaps the greatest Southern novelist, although Flannery O’Connor and Harper Lee also have claim to that title. Regardless, his literary art places him among the great American authors. The title of today’s sermon, *Absalom, Absalom!*, is also the title of the novel Faulkner published in 1936, which serves as the sequel to his famous and baffling book, *The Sound and the Fury*. The two novels, taken together, confirm the truth of the biblical adage that the sins of the parents are visited upon their children - generation after generation. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, the young man, Quentin, goes to Harvard University against his wishes at his father’s command. Quentin is gay, however, and the role cast for him by his father - being the successful financial and genetic head of the family - is incompatible with Quentin’s God-given nature. In delirious confusion, Quentin ends his life. Riddled with despair for his son, stricken with panic regarding the fortunes of his once prominent family, and weighed down by a sense of responsibility for his son’s demise, Quentin’s father (who remains unnamed) goes mad with grief and drinks himself to death. Faulkner leaves the reader to contemplate the argument implied by the events of these novels: that a society and its culture must be considered murderous when any of its citizens are forced by convention and bigotry to forego their true selves and calling. In my own words, I reframe Faulkner’s argument in this way: while human beings value power, position, and profit more than we value each other, the Creation will continue to die at our hands.

Let us pray:

Almighty and Merciful God, out of all the words that are now spoken and heard, may it be your Living Word that stays in our hearts. Give us the grace to receive it; and give us the charity to let all the other words slip away. We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

If you haven’t been here over the past few weeks, you should know that we’ve been reading through the books of first and second Samuel, which trace the rise of David from a dirty little shepherd boy to the King of Israel. At this point in the narrative, we find David broken and disturbed by the tragedy of a civil war made necessary by the mutiny and treason of his beloved son, Absalom. In the end, however, like Quentin’s father in Faulkner’s novel, David realizes that he loves his son more than his wealth, his kingdom, his crown, or his legacy. He begs the departing generals to spare his son, but, like the good profiteers and politicians they are, they butcher him at the first opportunity. The runners come with the news, and David is crushed by the realization of his son’s violent death. For all his wealth, David lacks the one thing without which all else is meaningless: he is without peace, and the family of Israel has been bloodily rent asunder. Without the children he loves, no house will ever again be a home for David - whether that be a shepherd’s tent or a mansion made of cedar and gold.

This is going to be difficult and uncomfortable, but I’m asking you now to reflect with me on the reality of death - the scriptures lead us here and, moreover, it is the ultimate context of the Good News.

When I was 16, one of my best friends was killed in a car accident. It was wintertime in Maine, which means the roads were icy and unpredictable. As she and her fiancé were driving home, a log truck came up over the crest of a hill, hit a patch of black ice, skidded out of control, and crushed their car. My friend Jessica was killed instantly, or so they say.

My parents and I lived in Montreal at the time. We got a call one afternoon, and my grandmother said, “You need to come home.” It is 9 hours from Montreal to Princeton, Maine. 9 hours of staring out a car window onto grey skies and white fields. 9 hours in which we hardly said a word. 9 hours of knowing we had to face this loss; 9 hours of not knowing how we could. I was unprepared for the reality and emptiness that lay at the end of that trip.

I had never known grief like that before. It was uncontrollable, unavoidable, and lingers to this day. And while my response to that grief has changed, and we have all gone on living, the theft of Jessica is a permanent reality with no recourse, no appeal, and no explanation. So we come to the question of God: where was God; where is God?

If we can bring ourselves to believe the scriptures, I think God is weeping. My heart tells me that God is looking at our hurt, our brokenness, and crying, like King David - oh my daughters, oh my sons… if only I could have died for you - I love you; I love you and you are no more: the family I longed for, the creation I called into being is broken - how ever will these, my children, come into the life of flourishing love that was always my intention for them?

Indeed, the Heavenly Parent hears our cries, sees our longing, feels our confusion, *grieves* our civil wars - for all wars are civil wars in the eyes of God - and says to the Eternally Begotten One, the Living Word:

*You must go with power*

*and take the death of creation into yourself,*

*that our children may see in you the way of peace,*

*the way of life, the way of truth.*

*We must surrender once for all to Death*

*so that our power over Death might be revealed:*

*we must die so they might see*

*and understand the Love that is the foundation of all life*.

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You know, sometimes people say to me: “You’re a theologian and pastor, so let me ask you - where is this God of love when Jesus is on the Cross?” It’s a legitimate question and expresses a definitive human doubt. If fact, we ask the question of God in regard to everyone:

where is God in the tragedies and broken hearts of our lives;

where is God for the children dying down the street at St. Jude’s;

where is God for the one-armed, emaciated homeless guy, named Bill, who stands on the corner of North and East Parkways begging for food and water;

where was God when my friend Jessica was killed by icy roads and a log truck;

where was God when Hitler murdered Europe;

where was God when the Allies decided to burn alive the men, women, and children of Hiroshima;

where was God when the Yellow Fever decimated Memphis;

where was God while thousands of African slaves died in their own vomit and excrement in the Middle Passage;

where was God when the Cherokees died of thirst and hunger on the trail of tears;

where was God when Absalom was hung by his hair in a tree and had to wait there until his enemies came and killed him;

where was God when Cain slew his brother Abel;

where was God when Eve was *tricked* into picking apples in the wrong orchard:

where was God …where was God….where was God!!!

Where is God when Jesus is hanging on the Cross?

Friends, listen now for the Good News: *God* is hanging on the Cross.

God is hanging on the Cross.

God is hanging on the Cross.

The life of the Triune God is an intimacy beyond our knowing; but it has been revealed that on the day when Jesus gave his life for the Creation, the Father/Mother and the Holy Spirit had the very fabric of their Oneness torn apart. And yet they possess that power which is unique to God: the power to give life. Like the sending of the Son, the Father/Mother sends the Spirit to reveal *in* the Son the reality of God’s eternal life, that life which cannot be undone or overcome.

And so we come to one of the most profound texts in all of scripture: the climax of the sixth chapter of John’s Gospel. Allow me to read it for you again:

Jesus says:

**51**“I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”

**52**The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”

**53**So Jesus said to them, “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.

**54**Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day;

***55****for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.*

**56**Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood *abide in me, and I in them*.

**57**Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats of me will live because of me.

**58**This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.”

**59**He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

If Jesus’ flesh is not materially bread, but mystically so, then we must ask John what he means by “eating.” If body and bread, and blood and wine, are the same in his metaphor, then to what may we compare the act of eating? Just as we must ask of William Faulkner what his narrative implies, likewise, we must ask what we are to infer when John uses a meal to describe the reception of God’s gift of Eternal Life.

Eating, at its most fundamental level, is the expression of the human desire to live. Moreover, stripped bare of its aesthetic and cultural meaning, eating is the basis of human community: for all of the hundreds of thousands of years in the history of our species, the infant human being has suckled at its mother’s breast and, so, learned that the things necessary for life are found outside the self in togetherness with others. Indeed, the act of eating expresses not only the desire for life, but inherently admits the necessary legitimacy of the lives of everyone with whom we eat. When David refuses to eat, he is declaring to everyone that the loss of Absalom’s life is like the loss of his own. And when the generals come to him and say, “You have to eat,” they are forcing David to ratify the choices and sacrifices they have made.

Jesus becomes spiritual food for us when we take in - when we consume - the nourishing revelation of his life, death, and resurrection. When we *perceive* in Jesus a God weeping inconsolably and fasting for a humanity that never should have died, we have begun to suckle at the Divine Breast; we have begun to imbibe the grace that nourishes for the work of Christ’s kingdom; we have begun to ingest the power for life that is the great gift of the Creator, whereby ordinary folks like you and me become the royal priesthood of Body of Christ. When we go forth, fed by the revelation of the Crucified-Resurrected Jesus, we ourselves become the body and blood of Christ, broken and spilled out that the world might come to know that the time has come when God will save his people – and all Creation with them.

The mystery of Death is one that God has not clarified for us. But in light of the reality of Death, and the Evil and Sin that cause it, God has said to us and all Creation: “Here’s my Son, I have not forsaken you; you can trust me.” The grace of this revelation is the food that nourishes for eternal life. Will we reach out and receive the portion God gives, putting our whole trust in his grace? Will we consume the meaning of this revelation and, in so doing, express our desire to live?

 By the power of the Holy Spirit, may it be so. Amen.