

Deepening Relationships: Expanding the Table

2 Samuel Chapter 9

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Friends, We have been on a journey together this summer. And before we dive into today's texts, I want to remind you why we started this journey in the first place.

We believe something at Lewinsville that shapes everything about how we understand the Christian life. We believe that God is Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which means that at the very heart of the universe, before anything else existed, there was relationship. There was knowing and being known. There was love moving between persons. And when God created human beings in that image, God made us for the same thing. We are not meant to exist in isolation. We are meant to know and be known. And because of this theological truth, we cannot fully know God if we are not willing to fully know one another. And to truly know each other requires vulnerability, and discomfort, and repair, and a profound respect for the dignity of every person we encounter.

Which is why we have spent the summer letting the bible's ancient stories about complicated relationships teach us how

better to know one another.

We started in Genesis with Cain and Abel, where we learned that the first sin named as sin in the Bible is the refusal to be responsible for another human being. Then we witnessed the lives of Abraham and Hagar and Sarah. Rebecca and Leah. Jacob and Esau. All of them are complicated people. Complicated love stories. Complicated messes that God somehow worked through anyway.

Then we turned the pages of our Bibles to first and second Samuel, and we met David. Not a saint, but a flawed person whose life was marked by remarkable faithfulness and profound failure. David was the forgotten son, left in the fields while his brothers stood before the prophet Samuel. He was the shepherd who defeated Goliath, the king who wrote psalms, the man who committed adultery and arranged a murder, and the father who wept over his rebellious son.

And today we encounter another David story that is often overlooked. But to fully understand today's text, we have to go back to the beginning of David's story.

Before David was king, there was Saul, Israel's first king. Saul

seemed like the right choice at first, he was tall, strong, and looked like a leader. But over time, Saul became ruled by fear and paranoia. He stopped listening to God, and God told the prophet Samuel that Saul's line would not continue. God would choose a new king, not based on appearance but on the heart. That person was David. But from the moment David entered Saul's life, Saul saw him as a threat. His jealousy turned into violence. Saul tried to kill David, sent soldiers after him, and chased him through the wilderness for years. David became a fugitive, running from the very king he was destined to replace.

But in the middle of this conflict, there was an unexpected friendship. Saul's son Jonathan, the crown prince and heir to the throne, should have seen David as his enemy. Instead, Jonathan loved David as a brother. Scripture says their souls were "knit together." Jonathan warned David when Saul planned to harm him and repeatedly risked his own life, his inheritance, and his relationship with his father to protect him. David and Jonathan made a covenant with one another, promising they would not abandon each other. Eventually, Saul and Jonathan died in battle against the Philistines. When David heard the news, he mourned

deeply. He tore his clothes, wept, and said of Jonathan: "I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother. Your love for me was wonderful. How the mighty have fallen."

Which is why our text today opens with David saying: "Is there anyone left of the house of Saul to whom I may show kindness for Jonathan's sake?" David is looking to honor the covenant he made with Jonathan long ago...

And David's servants find Mephibosheth.

But first, you need to know about Mephibosheth's background.

The day Saul and Jonathan were killed in battle... panic spread through the royal household. Because in the ancient world, when a dynasty fell, the new king did not typically allow the old king's family to survive. They were threats and they were rivals. Mephibosheth was five years old. And his nurse, understanding that Mephibosheth's life is in danger, grabbed him and ran. She was trying to save his life but while trying to flee she dropped Mephibosheth and he was injured, causing him to be disabled for the rest of his life.

As a result of his injury and being the descendant of a

disgraced King, Mephibosheth ends up in a place called Lo-debar. Lo-debar literally means the place of nothing. Lo-debar is a place people end up when they have run out of all other options and they need to disappear.

Not only is Mephibosheth politically complicated, he is also disabled in a society that has no framework for honoring the dignity of disabled people.

So... When we meet Mephibosheth in today's text we are to understand that he has been living in Lo-debar for years. When David's servants find him and bring him before the king, Mephibosheth does exactly what one might expect. He prostrates himself before the king and calls himself a dead dog. He is attempting to demonstrate that he is not a threat to this king.

And David says: do not be afraid. I will show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore your grandfather's land to you. You will always eat at my table.

This is beautiful, right? A generous and benevolent king who kept his promise to his best friend.

Except.

I want us to take another look, carefully examine the story.

Mephibosheth did not ask for any of this. He was not consulted rather he was fetched and brought before the king. And then king David from his position of enormous power and privilege, made a series of decisions about Mephibosheth's life.

You will have your grandfather's land. You will eat at my table. You will live in Jerusalem. And Ziba, the former servant of Saul's household, will manage the land and farm it and bring in the produce.

Ziba will manage the land. Not Mephibosheth.

David has made many assumption about Mephibosheth based on his disability, and based on his own ideas about what Mephibosheth is capable of... David has restored what was taken from Mephibosheth but has not restored Mephibosheth's agency. He has given him a seat at the table. A seat Mephibosheth did not choose. A seat that belongs to David's generosity, not to Mephibosheth's dignity.

David never asks Mephibosheth what he wants. Never asks what he is capable of. Never treats him as someone with a perspective worth consulting.

Before I am too hard on David, it is important to keep in mind

that David is keeping a covenant and acting with extraordinary generosity in a particularly violent world. And it is important to note that the biblical text wants us to admire that. And we should. But sometimes even genuine kindness carries assumptions we cannot see. And I believe that David's privilege and enormous amount of power kept him from fully seeing and fully knowing Mephibosheth. I do want to clarify what I mean when I use the word privilege. Because that word carries weight and I want to use it carefully. Privilege is not about being a bad person. It is not about having had an easy life or never having suffered. Privilege simply means that there are aspects of your identity or your circumstances that give you advantages in the world that you did not earn and may not even notice.

Examples of privilege are the ability to walk into most buildings without thinking about accessibility. Or the assumption that when you speak in a meeting you are competent until proven otherwise.

And privilege can get in the way of cultivating deep relationship with others. Privilege can make us think we already know things about someone else's life. Privilege can make us have

assumptions about what others might need, or what they are capable of, or what would help them. And those assumptions, however well-intentioned, become a barrier to actually seeing the person in front of us.

That is what David did. He looked at Mephibosheth and saw a disabled man, a dependent, someone who needed to be managed and provided for. He did not look at Mephibosheth and see a full human being with his own perspective, his own capabilities, his own ideas about what his life should look like.

I have to be honest and say that I know this pattern. Because I have often lived it.

An example of how this occurred in my life... When our Refugee Resettlement Team welcomed the first family we ever helped (way back in 2022), we were prepared. Overprepared, actually. We had read the guidelines. We had done the research. We set up their apartment with everything we thought they would need. Furniture. Linens. Kitchen supplies. Including a crock pot.

Which led to a funny encounter on the day we welcomed them to their new apartment. I was showing the eldest son around

the house and attempting to answer any questions he and his family may have about all the items in the house. During the walkthrough he pointed to the crock pot looking confused and asked "what is that?"

I quickly responded "OH! That's a crock pot, they are very helpful" I continued to explain to him that a crockpot cooks food very slowly.

To which he began to look even more confused and asked "why would you slow down the cooking?"

Now. If you grew up in America, a crock pot makes complete sense. You put the food in, you set the timer, you go to work, you come home eight hours later, dinner is ready.

I tried to explain this but was met with just more confusion.

I tried again. You let this cook the food while you are at work during the day...

More confusion.

And then something dawned on his face.

He said: but that is what my mom is for!

The family politely returned the crock pot. And very graciously, very patiently, explained to us that what they actually

needed was an Afghan pressure cooker. Because in their culture food is cooked quickly, with heat and pressure.

We had set up the kitchen we would have wanted. Not the kitchen they needed.

We were so busy being helpful that we forgot to ask.

That is the crock pot problem. And it is the David problem. And it is my problem more often than I would like to admit.

God reiterated this lesson to me last week, while the youth and I were at Montreat Youth Conference.

As you heard this morning, Montreat is a sacred place for our youth. And I mean that theologically, not just sentimentally. There is something that happens when youth return to the same place year after year. The mountains do not change. The creek does not change. The worship hall does not change. And in a season of life defined by constant change, that consistency becomes something holy. The space holds their history. It holds their growth. It holds the prayers they have prayed and the friendships they have formed and the moments when God felt very close and very real. Every year they return and the place is waiting for them. And that waiting is itself a kind of grace.

I know this. I have led this trip five years in a row. I know what Montreat means to these youth.

And this year, for calendar reasons, we had to change the week we went. Which meant we had to change our housing. Which meant the familiar rhythms were already disrupted before we even arrived.

And then I did what I sometimes do when I am feeling the pressure of a complicated situation. I got very focused on the schedule. Very attentive to the details. Very organized and very prepared and very much in charge of making sure everything went smoothly.

I had every good intention. I was thinking about the youth the whole time. I just was not consulting them.

Wednesday evening it caught up with me. There was a bit of a kerfuffle. And in the middle of that kerfuffle someone reminded me, graciously but clearly, that this week was not for me. That my over-attention to the schedule was not creating space for the sacred moments. It was crowding them out.

I had done exactly what David did. I had decided what the week needed to look like. I had managed it. I had organized it. I had

brought all my experience and all my best intentions to bear on it. And in doing all of that I had forgotten to ask the most important question.

What do you actually need this week to be?

I am the pastor. I have been doing this for five years. I know Montreat.

And I still got it wrong. Because knowing about something is not the same as knowing the people you are doing it with. And showing up with good intentions is not the same as showing up with open ears and an open heart.

It turns out David had the same problem. And the consequences were far more serious than a kerfuffle on a Wednesday night. David never fully learned the lesson.

Because today's text is not the end of Mephibosheth story.

Years later, when David's son Absalom rebelled, David was forced to flee Jerusalem. During that time, Ziba, the servant David had placed in charge of Mephibosheth's land, betrayed him by falsely claiming that Mephibosheth had turned against David. Believing Ziba's story, David gave away Mephibosheth's property. But when David returned, Mephibosheth revealed the truth: he had wanted

to flee with David but was unable to do so because he depended on Ziba for help. Instead of restoring everything, David divided the land between them. What stands out is that Mephibosheth's vulnerability was not created by his disability but by a system that left him dependent on someone else's honesty and power. David's attempt to provide for him had unintentionally left room for him to be exploited. Kindness and generosity alone do not change structures of oppression.

So what do we do with all of this? How does this help us deepen relationships?

We can give people seats at our tables and set up their apartments with everything we think they need and offer our charity and our programs and our goodwill. Which is all really important to do.

But if we want to truly know the people we are sitting next to at the dinner table, if we want to go beyond charity into genuine relationships, we have to go further.

We have to ask questions and be willing to hear people's responses.

We have to be willing to be changed by the encounter.

We have to respect the dignity and agency of the people we are trying to help, not just look for their gratitude.

We have to be open to the possibility that the person we thought we were helping might have something to teach us that we could not have learned any other way.

Because to fully know God we have to be open to fully knowing the people God has placed in our path. Not as objects of our generosity. Not as recipients of our charity. But as full human beings, made in the image of the same God who made us, with something to offer that we do not yet know we need.

That is what expanding the table actually means.

Not just making room for more people.

Letting them help decide what gets served.

Amen.

Brubaker, Layne, and Abigail Velázquez, hosts. "Episode 18: What is Ableism?" *Sick and hAlarious: Encountering God in it All*.

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