



"TRIAGE"

SCRIPTURE: 2 SAMUEL 18: 5-9, 15, 31-33; EPHESIANS 4:25-5:2
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

August 12, 2018

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2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33

18:5 The king ordered Joab and Abishai and Ittai, saying, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom." And all the people heard when the king gave orders to all the commanders concerning Absalom.

18:6 So the army went out into the field against Israel; and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim.

18:7 The men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the slaughter there was great on that day, twenty thousand men.

18:8 The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword.

18:9 Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. 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.

18:15 And ten young men, Joab's armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him, and killed him.

18:31 Then the Cushite came; and the Cushite said, "Good tidings for my lord the king! For the LORD has vindicated you this day, delivering you from the power of all who rose up against you."

18:32 The king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" The Cushite answered, "May the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man."

18:33 The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

4:25 So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.

4:26 Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger,

4:27 and do not make room for the devil.

4:28 Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy.

4:29 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.

4:30 And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption.

4:31 Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice,

4:32 and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

5:1 Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children,

5:2 and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

Questions for God:

1. How does faith development happen for ourselves, our kids, other faiths?
From culture, family, tragedy? How does genuine faith happen?
 2. When do the number of life lessons begin to decrease?
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It's hard to accept that Virginia Bradley has passed away. She always seemed to find a way to bounce back, to stick around for another birthday, another worship service.

I have a feeling she'd have a quick answer to the question, "When do the number of life lessons begin to decrease?" With a twinkle in her eye and a gentle authority in her voice, she'd tell us that we never stop learning.

For 102 years she grew in her faith. Virginia's faith stood the test of time.

Genuine faith happens when we let our lives unfold without having all the answers.

Because faith is not about knowing, it is about believing. So, the minute we think our faith is done and needs no more learning and growing, that's the minute it has ceased to be faith at all.

As people charged with living out our faith, the question is not do we continue learning and growing, the question is how do we know our faith's growth and development is happening in a way that is making the world a better place, a place where faith is a force of healing and not harm.

How do we nurture a healing faith in a world where so much harm is done in the name of faith?

Our scripture passage from Ephesians today gives us some pretty clear instructions. For the writer of this letter (who probably was not Paul, but instead someone building on the previous letters of Paul, that so profoundly shaped the early landscape of teaching in emerging Jesus-following communities), cultivating the virtues of Jesus and combatting the vices that Jesus combatted were central to having a genuine faith.

This letter writer was speaking to the church with a capital "C" not just to a located community—unlike Paul's earlier letters, this letter is not defined by the contextual concerns of a particular community. It is more expansive, it is more provocative—following Jesus looks like this no matter what community you are in.

Jesus' followers speak truth to each other—because we are all connected. Lying to each other distorts the gift of the Holy Spirit—even defiles the Holy Spirit. We speak truth to our neighbor because we are a part of one Body—because we are intimately connected.

We can be angry, but we don't let anger make us sin. So, we don't fester in anger, we express it in ways that build up the community. Everything that comes out of our mouths should be in the service of building up community—lies break down community, harboring anger breaks down community—so we speak the truth, we

deal with our anger. We put away malice, slander, bitterness—extending kindness, forgiveness, and love to each other.

The writer of Ephesians implores us to be imitators of God—an invitation found nowhere else in the New Testament. Paul's letters, in fact, had instructed readers to imitate him, Paul—as a model of faith. Ephesians says be imitators of God—be loving, be forgiving, be truth-telling.

On Thursday, Richard and I along with several others from Grace Covenant attended a community gathering in West Asheville about the future of Kairos West, a ministry of the Episcopal Diocese of Western North Carolina and the Cathedral of All Souls.

Kairos West is space in West Asheville whose goal is to build strong, healthy and liberative community. Things like 12 Baskets happen there every day—rescued food helps create table fellowship and build community for any who find their way there.

Things like the Steady Collective providing clean needles for those struggling with addiction happen there every day.

This gathering on Thursday took place because the City of Asheville issued a cease and desist order to Kairos West citing new zoning regulations. The City of Asheville was responding to complaints by at least one business owners about things like needles discarded on the sidewalk, human waste in areas where children play, and an increase in drug activity and people sleeping in areas that are not authorized shelters.

It struck me at the gathering, that the community was well equipped to come together and address the issues that were raised. Unfortunately the City's action had turned the community coming together to solve a problem into many of the most marginalized in that community defending themselves, justifying their very existence in the community.

With the threat of Kairos West having to cease the life-giving, life-saving ministries that happen there, those who have found community because of what happens at Kairos West were put in the position of justifying their presence in the community.

What struck me the most at the gathering was the way some progressive white-skinned people, just like us, are finding themselves stretched by community in ways that obviously don't feel good to them, and some of them expect that discomfort to be something the larger community should fix.

It was a mirror for people like many of us: White skinned people who are educated, who are employed, who are housed, who fit the norms of our culture, who consider

ourselves progressive—we have learned to expect comfort and to be offended when our comfort is disrupted.

The value that came up in the complaints about Kairos West, to a person, referred to the way children were being exposed to things they shouldn't have to be exposed to as children. "Our children should live sheltered from drug needles and not have to see people who have nowhere to go to the bathroom or to sleep or who are hungry."

The belief that our kids deserve a childhood defined by innocence and maybe also defined by ignorance of the suffering of the rest of the world is one we've learned to value without telling the truth about the cost—our children are safe, our children enjoy the innocence of childhood at the expense of other children not having a childhood.

There are more hungry people in Asheville and more people un-housed in Asheville and more drug needles in Asheville because our city is becoming more and more gentrified, less and less hospitable to people who are not wealthy, who cannot afford to live in a neighborhood deemed "safe" or "family friendly."

Where did any of us get the idea that we and our children are entitled to a way of life that sequesters us, protects us from the suffering of others, where our living space makes it easy for us to ignore the suffering of others? That can only be a true community value if it is something we value for all children, for all people.

And while our words might say that we do, our actions, our policies, our practices only exacerbate economic disparities. If any children are living in poverty, if any children are hungry or living in dangerous neighborhoods then no children are truly safe. Tolerating the reality of hungry, house-less, unsafe children means that protecting childhood becomes just another mark of affluence, instead of a human right.

Genuine faith does not flee from such difficult realities, but stays present and open to the growth that truth carries with it. Genuine faith is all about moral triage—about being able to prioritize what faith practices are most life-giving in spaces where competing moralities are in play.

David's grief over the death of his son Absalom is about more than tragedy and loss, it is about a difficult confrontation with truth.

The writer of 2 Samuel wants to paint a sympathetic picture of David by suggesting he was not responsible for his son Absalom's death. Absalom was a rebel, he was on a quest for power. David told his troops to take care not to bring harm to Absalom in battle. But to them Absalom was an enemy of the state, he was a traitor.

Absalom had learned how to be successful from his dad: arrogance, grasping at power, violence.

David's poignant grief at the news of his son's death: "Absalom, my son, my son. If only I could have died in your place." If only I had shown you a different way to be in this world. If only I had lived in a way that had truly given you life—and not cost you your life.

His son's death is the wages of David's way of life—his grasping, his conquest, his lust for more power. This difficult moment of truth for David, is also touchstone in his faith—David's life doesn't get any easier from here, but he becomes more practiced at understanding the difference between his power and God's power.

David began to understand the complicated truth of who he was—both perpetrator and victim—responsible for the suffering he caused, and caught in cycles of societal delusion that diminished his humanity as well as the humanity of others. God's capacity to triage competing moralities surfaces David's conscience and his humility.

How do we know our faith's growth and development is happening, in a way that is making the world a place where faith is a force of healing and not for harm?

In Spike Lee's new film, *BlackKkKlansman*, we are forced to look at the intentionality of the Ku Klux Klan. In the 1970s David Duke, Grand Wizard of the KKK, was busy working to make the Klan and white supremacy more mainstream. He appeared in public wearing a suit—and kept the white robes and hoods for secret meetings and ceremonies. He used science and history and yes, Christianity, to explain the factual nature of white male Aryan Anglo Saxon supremacy.

And his stated goal was for the Klan, or what he began calling "The Organization," to gain more footing in the structures of public power. The ultimate goal was to have someone who believed in the supremacy of the white race in the Whitehouse.

Spike Lee released his film this past Friday, August 10, on the one-year anniversary of the Charlottesville White Supremacists rally where white men with torches filled the streets with their chants of "Jews won't take our place" and "White Lives Matter." And where Heather Heyer, a young woman there protesting the white supremacists, was killed by 20 year-old Nazi sympathizer, James Alex Fields.

Spike Lee's film forces us to look straight in the face of how Christianity, how Jesus Christ is evoked in White Supremacist rhetoric.

And these hate groups talk about growing their faith, strengthening their faith, taking risks for their faith, sacrificing for the good of the country. They use some of

the same language we do to cultivate their virtues and discourage their vices, to instill their lives with what they understand as god-given purpose.

If we want to define ourselves as people of faith in a world where faith is deployed for hate, we must never stop learning how to have moral courage in dangerous and divided spaces.

Jesus shows us what moral courage is—speaking truth to power, compassion and justice and mercy and love that not only stands the test of time, but also stands at the margins of society and says love will find a way.

Thanks be to God.