

Parents sacrifice for their children. When Emi was born, Stef and I made all sorts of sacrifices for her sake. We sacrificed time. We sacrificed money. We sacrificed sleep. We sacrificed whatever we had to, to make sure our daughter had everything she needed.

Those sacrifices come in all sizes. A dad might sacrifice the last bite of his favorite dessert and give it to his child who loves it just as much. A mom might give up a career because that's what's best for her children.

And I don't know of any parent who would not be willing to sacrifice their own life in order to save the life of their child. Nearly every parent would be willing to take the place of their child if they're suffering. There is no greater example of sacrificial love than the love of a parent for their child.

We see that love play out in the story of David's love for his children. It's an imperfect love. A foolish love, you might say. A love that leads to some unfortunate choices and some terrible events. But it's an intense, sacrificial love, none the less.

The story plays out over the course of 6 chapters of 2 Samuel, from chapter 13 through chapter 18. But here's a relatively quick summary. King David had, in total, nineteen sons from several different wives. Amnon was the first-born son of David and was in line to be king.

Amnon, however, was not right in the head, to put it mildly. He began lusting after his half-sister, Tamar. He became absolutely obsessed with having her. So one day, he faked being sick so that he could ask her into his bedroom to take care of him. And when they were alone, he raped her.

When King David heard of this, he was angry, but he did nothing to punish Amnon. He loved his son and that love blinded him. He couldn't admit to himself that Amnon was a criminal.

Absalom, who was the full brother of Tamar, was also infuriated, both with Amnon and with his father David for not giving his sister justice. Hate festered in Absalom's heart until finally he conspired to have Amnon murdered.

Once again, David was angry. Once again he did nothing to punish Absalom. He loved his son and that love blinded him. He couldn't admit to himself that Absalom was a criminal.

Absalom had gotten some of the justice he desired for his sister, but not all of it. The hate in his heart turned from Amnon to his father David, who he had never forgiven for letting Amnon off the hook. And so he began plotting against his father.

Absalom was handsome and charismatic and he began making friends among the powerful men of Israel. Convincing them that King David could not be trusted to give anyone justice. That Absalom himself would make a far better king.

For four years, Absalom secretly gathered power and influence, until the day finally came. Absalom traveled to the city of Hebron on a false pretense and the word went out: "Absalom is made king at Hebron!" Thousands of Israelites rallied to him and joined his rebellion. Rather than subject the people of Jerusalem to a bloody battle, David fled the city.

Now, as you may recall, David was a man of war with a long, distinguished military history. And there were many in the army who were fiercely loyal to him. He soon had his own army mustered. David wanted to lead the battle himself, but they convinced him that he was too valuable to risk being killed or captured. So he appointed his three best commanders to lead instead: Joab, Abishai, and Ittai. And he strictly ordered them and all his soldiers, "Deal gently with Absalom." Do not kill him if you can avoid it.

Well, the battle was waged. The two forces met, not on a plain, but in the middle of forest, oddly enough. And as he was riding through the forest, Absalom's long hair became tangled in the branches of a tree. So tangled that when his mule ran off, he was left dangling from the branches.

A group of David's men saw Absalom hanging there, but they remembered David's instructions and ran to tell their commander, who was Joab. Joab completely disagreed with David's desire to spare Absalom's life, and so when he heard the news, he rushed to the site and immediately drove three javelins into Absalom's heart. We hear in our reading today how David responded to the news of his son's death. He weeps, "*O Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!*"

David fought a lot of enemies in his life. He conquered the giant Goliath. He killed 200 Philistines with his own hands. He defeated King Saul in battle. He carved out the nation of Israel from the lands of the Canaanites and Philistines. He was a hero who conquered enemy after enemy.

Absalom was David's enemy. Absalom was Israel's enemy. Under any other circumstances, defeating Absalom and retaking the throne would be a marvelous, heroic victory for David. But it's not. No, it's a tragedy.

Why? Because David loved Absalom. He loved him with all his heart. He loved him so much that he wished that he could have died in Absalom's place. Absalom hated David. He wanted to seize his throne. He wanted to murder him. Absalom was filled with nothing but bitterness and vengeance and violence toward his father.

While David just wanted his son back. He wanted peace. He wanted his family restored. He had already lost one son to sin and violence. He didn't want to lose another. It's hard to imagine that level of sacrificial love. And the love between a parent and child is probably the only place where we ever see it in our lives.

That's exactly why Jesus used that same relationship in his parable of the prodigal son. The parable of the prodigal son doesn't ever say that the son hated his father, but it's not hard to read between the lines and guess that he must have. When he tells his father to give him his share of the inheritance, he's essentially telling him, "I wish you were dead." When he leaves and moves to a far off country, he's demonstrating how much disdain he has for his father and his home.

It's not a huge leap to see Absalom in the place of that foolish young man and David in the place of that forgiving father. Who just wants his son back. Who stands at their front door, staring into the distance. Hoping, praying, that one day his son will come home.

And it's not hard to believe that had Absalom returned to David in peace, David would have put a robe on his shoulders and a ring on his finger. He would have killed the fattened calf, thrown a feast in the palace, and declared with joy, "My son who was dead is alive again. He was lost, but now he is found. Come and celebrate with me."

But that moment never comes. The story of David and Absalom ends in death and tragedy. It's an ending that the parable of the prodigal son could have easily had as well. The son never repenting. Dying in a far off land. His father at home, hearing the news, weeping for the son who was lost. Why doesn't it end that way?

Well, because the story of the prodigal son is our story. Which means that the story of Absalom and David is our story. We rebelled against God and tried to take his place on the throne. We ate the fruit that the devil promised would make us like God, knowing good and evil. We rejected our father. We murdered our brother. We have hearts filled with hate and bitterness and vengeance. We are at war with God.

In our sinfulness, we refuse to obey his laws. We refuse to accept his authority. We scheme and plot to pursue the evil desires within our hearts. We take every good thing our creator has given to us and misuse it for sinful purposes. We are Absalom. We are the prodigal son. We are sinners.

And we have a father who loves us. A father who loves us with a sacrificial love that defies comprehension. It's no wonder that scripture writes about God's love the way that it does...

*“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

*“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.”*

*“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*

In his great love for his son, David wished that he could have taken Absalom's place. In God's great love for us, we have a Savior who did take our place. Though we hated him. Rejected him. Though we were at war with him, he made peace with us by his blood. He ended the war, not by killing us, but by sacrificing himself for us.

And then rising again. That he might welcome us back into his home. Not as rebels, but as beloved children. And now nothing can separate us from his love.

David was not a perfect father. How he disciplined his children left much to be desired. But he was a man after God's own heart in this way: he loved his children. He forgave his children. He would have sacrificed anything for his children. Even his own life. Because that's exactly what his Lord would do for him. Amen.