

For Our Kids: Surviving Parenting

2 Samuel 18:31-33

Let me add my welcome back and my “nice to see you” to all of you. We are excited to be in God’s Word today as we ask for more of his love and vision for our individual lives and for the life of our church. Over the last six months we’ve asked God to give us a bigger vision for our city, for our neighbors, and now For Our Kids.

I have one image of being “For Our Kids” that I can’t get out of my head. This Christmas Eve, our children’s director, Paul, and his wife, Jeanie were leading the kids in a reflection on the Christmas story with this big box up here on the chancel. They kept reiterating to the kids that there was a present inside this box for *everyone*. Then when they opened it, they revealed a baby doll “Jesus” in a crib, and this sweet two year old bounded up the stairs and stood at Paul’s feet, arms reaching up, insisting just with her posture on holding baby Jesus. Paul tried to press on for at least a minute without actually handing Jesus over, but there she was. Finally, Paul handed her Jesus.

Isn’t that so cute? That little girl, desperate to hold Jesus, quietly waiting to receive him, that little girl is easy to love, isn’t she? I was sitting next to her momma, and believe you me, she was proud. But there was another scene I didn’t catch on camera, of a couple little kids so mad that *she* got to hold baby Jesus. They were crying and refusing to leave until they got the doll! How do you think their parents were feeling in the moment? How can we be a people that love the quiet kids and the screamers equally? The patient and the envious both?

I know there are a lot of you with small children and adult children that you wish would stand quietly and beg to have some of Jesus. Instead, our welcome cards every week have prayers for kids difficult kids. First, sorry, this message is not going to be the five top strategies for surviving parenting difficult kids that suddenly changes all that. We will have a parenting class coming up next month, because we do want to help you. But today I want to draw all of our attention to a vision of parenting together, as a community, as we not only survive parenting but experience more of God’s love in the midst of the most difficult challenges of our life, a lot of which prove to be people. How can we love anyway, all the time?

Let me encourage you—the Bible has good, practical teaching for your everyday life. It’s not like it’s a textbook with headers that say “surviving parenthood.” But the Bible IS full of real stories of real people—lots of broken, trying-to-survive communities with parents and people who do life with parents. And the overarching story of the Bible is that God loves you and wants to meet you in your everyday challenges. The Bible stories show you a way of walking through similar life circumstances with a powerful God with you and in you and how that his presence changes everything. Even surviving parenting.

So I want to remind us of one such story of a man who did a not-perfect job surviving parenting but whose life shows us the tremendous power of having a God who loves us anyway, all the way. If you're in survival mode. If you're out of solutions, looking for a better, more abundant way, today's message is for you. Let's pray.

Let me tell you the story that gets us to our passage today in 2 Samuel 18. David became a dad at 30, becomes king in his 40's and when he's in his 50's the proverbial stuff hits the fan in his family life. He has the quintessential mid-life crisis at 55 and the next 10 years is an outworking of David's choosing his own way instead of God's. His passive nature wreaks havoc in the parenting arena. It's imperfect and incredibly messy, so we can all just sit back and feel incredibly at home and comparatively good about ourselves, okay? The parenting trouble reaches a pivotal moment with his son, Absalom. David's forced to run away, abandon his throne, and weep his way out of town as his *son*, Absalom, leads an insurrection against him and claims the throne.

David's trying to survive parenting here while also running a country. He's a dad so many of us can relate to. Good at his job where he's confident, but not so confident at home. David sees Absalom as a reflection back on himself, in good and bad ways. Like his dad, Absalom's a strong leader capable of running a country. Unlike David, Absalom is a son of decisive action and justice that David couldn't find the guts to be. Absalom is the product of the ways in which David probably wishes he could have been a better parent. Absalom is flawed, but flawed for reasons David should take responsibility for. I wonder how many of us with difficult people in our lives could reflect back a lot of the same things. Proud of some things, but where they're tough, we put the blame back on ourselves.

So how is David going to love his son when Absalom is trying to kill him? How's he going to love his son when everyone around him would rather see Absalom dead? David tells his generals to deal kindly with his son, Absalom, but they don't. They see Absalom for the shadow side of who he is: a murderer, a rebel, an embarrassment to not only David but the whole kingdom. So when Absalom leads his armies out to kill David, David's top general kills Absalom.

So this passage is the moment when David finds out what happened in the battle between his army and his son's: 2 Samuel 18:31:

And behold, the Cushite came, and the Cushite said, "Good news for my lord the king! For the LORD has delivered you this day from the hand of all who rose up against you." The king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?" And the Cushite answered, "May the enemies of my lord the king and all who rise up against you for evil be like that young man." And 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!"

Let's just pause there a minute. What emotion does that sound like? [Lament, grief, regret...] Can you connect with that feeling?

Gratefully, I don't think too many of you can connect with this story directly—a child runs away, coming back with an army, stealing a throne and setting off with intent to kill. At a minimum, I don't know that any of you are royalty. But I suspect that somewhere in there, just because I know the world is broken, something in David's story is reflected in your life or in someone you know...

Who hasn't done battle with someone very close, maybe even a child, who is extremely difficult and has turned against you? And in those moments, don't we still love them, even when we wish they were making different choices?

On Christmas Eve, I think only three of us in the room knew the story behind the little girl asking for baby Jesus. Me, her mom, and Melodee MacKinnon. At least five years ago, I met her mom. It was a Thursday night after 5pm, which means the offices were completely empty because we take a Sabbath rest as a staff on Fridays. A young woman showed up, living out of her car with her dog and needed a place to go that night. I could tell she wasn't okay. I did my best to follow the protocol of our Titus ministry who helps those in need in our community, and I set up her up at a hotel with the resources you give when you give to Titus. I also called Melodee because I know she has a track record for advocating for people in crisis. She reached out to this young woman, too. Melodee reminded me this weekend that I had invited Shelby to come to worship Sunday morning. That invitation to mutual relationship meant something. She came! And then a couple days later, she was gone. Melodee kept praying, sending texts of love and occasionally made contact. A couple years later, she resurfaced having given her life to Jesus and moved back into the area, this time as a mom. That night at the beginning of the service was the first time I'd seen her all these years later. Sometimes you just know when you meet someone that you are personally destined to love them. I can't explain that. I don't feel that way about every single person I meet, but I felt that way about her. That no matter the circumstances, I was called to love her. Then here she was on Christmas Eve with that baby, that when she saw baby Jesus, ran up to hold him. I couldn't hold back the tears. If there were ever a 2 year old in my life that I wanted to know that baby Jesus wanted to be with them, wanted to be held by them, it would be this little girl. And I'd never even met her.

How much more a parent, a close friend, an uncle, a grandparent, that watches a kid take the super wrong path. How do you keep loving? How do you keep loving without enabling? How do you keep texting and reaching out when your heart is so connected and you get nothing back?

At the end of the day, whatever Absalom had done and whatever David hadn't, David says that he would die for his son. "Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" David loves him anyway, all the way. With a love that is completely unjustified by the circumstances and which embarrasses all of David's friends and generals. His love withstands the deepest of betrayals. How does he love like that?

God said of David that David was "a man after my heart, who will do all my will." (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22) Generations later, a boy would be born into the lineage of David, given the title, "the Son of David," who would be the rightful king and heir to the throne over all the people of the earth. He would be the one who was truly the man after God's own heart, who would do all God's will. That person was Jesus, God's own son. And Jesus says the same thing of all of us, all of the sons and

daughters that he has adopted into the family of God—Jesus would die for us, instead of us, o my son, o my daughter. He loves you anyway, all the way.

I love David's story of loving Absalom because his heart – imperfect man that he was—perfectly reflects the heart of our King Jesus and God our Father who does not count a record of wrongs against us. How does David love like that? Because his love is a reflection of God's love. He in that moment is reflecting the heart of his true Father who loves us anyway, all the way.

1 Corinthians 13 perfectly describes the love God gives – love that is patient and kind. It does not envy or boast, it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. The kids' Bible, the *Jesus Storybook Bible* calls God's love, his *hesed*, "His never stopping, never giving up, always and forever love."

This is God's heart for you. This is how he loves you, the rebel, the runaway, the hotheaded, the prideful, the angry, the betrayer, the achiever. God has never stopping, never giving up, always and forever love, for you. And he would rather die instead of you.

So Jesus died on the cross to bear all the trickle-down effect of all you've ever done and how that's messing up everyone around you. He died and was separated from his heavenly father so that you would *never* know that kind of separation, so that you could be accepted back into God's family with no record of wrong coming with you. So that you could hold Jesus, God's present for you. And so that you could enjoy his love now and forever. You can receive that kind of love right now. Just say in your own heart, "God, I need you to love me anyway, all the way."

And now I want to call you further still. Being people with God's never stopping, never giving up, always and forever love guiding your heart and mind, will *you* be willing to love difficult children anyway, all the way? Can we as a community reflect God's heart to be willing to give up our own lives for our kids?

You might already know exactly what this means for you to love anyway, all the way. I have laughed about some of the difficult parenting moments my friends have had this week. A kid *refusing* to go to school—I mean, could you not have got even a late start for the snow?-- , refusing to sleep, chatting incessantly... As you think about those who are difficult to love in your life, you might need to ask God for more of a particular facet of his love. I wonder if one of those phrases struck you about the perfect love of 1 Corinthians 13. Maybe you've found impossible to love as God does and need to go back and confess to a child or a parenting partner, I'm sorry I couldn't love you well. I'm asking God for more love.

That's you individually, and I want to invite you to reflect on that and to ask God for more of his love in whatever and for whomever you're facing this week.

But I also want us to reflect as a community. We want to be a people who are For Our Kids. So where do we need to grow in loving our kids anyway, all the way?

Our children's ministry gave me this list of pivotal parenting crisis moments hitting our community:

Solo parenting, lacking support because of dispersed families, children with anxiety, boundaries with technology, over-scheduling in sports and activities, engaging with children on spiritual matters, having patience and understanding with kids on the spectrum or ADD and being advocates for them, being on the same page with spouse on parenting in many ways.

David's general thought the only way out for Absalom was ending his life. There could be no restoration. But I wonder—how might you, how might we, come alongside parents just barely surviving in these circumstances? I think we have some work to do as a community in growing in love for our kids, all our kids, anyway and all the way. We have a couple more weeks to work this out, so I want us to pray together about this and ask God's Spirit to give us wisdom.

This is not something we typically do here, so if you're new here, please don't feel like if you come to Chapel Hill you're going to get called out and made to feel uncomfortable. But I think this could be a holy occasion for us to pray together as a community for those of us who need more of God's love for the difficult people in our lives. I want us to pray together for God's love that will enable us to love our kids anyway, all the way.

So if you're someone who needs more of God's love today for your kids will you please stand? Also stand if you as a member of this community know you are sent to love difficult people among us, and you want more of God's love for that work? We're going to pray for each other. Let's reach our hands up into the sky, like kids asking their parents for a present, and let's ask God for more of his love...