

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. **6** So the army went out into the field against Israel; and the battle was fought in the forest of Ephraim. **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. **8** The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword. **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... **15** And ten young men, Joab's armor-bearers, surrounded Absalom and struck him, and killed him...**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." **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." **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!"

I know that this doesn't really compare to the horrible drama of King David's saga, but as I struggled to understand the scripture this week, I was taken back to my junior year of high school...because what holds more relational pain than high school? Specifically, living out that relational pain as a church youth group. You know, kids who go to church together, and school together, who naturally start to date one another only to have those relationships go bad, thus causing the others in the group to take sides and create more drama. I'm not sure why we refer to high school as the good old days.

I was part of a very large youth group in my church. We had a youth choir and once a year we would join other youth choirs for a big concert...it always had a script for a few actors to showcase a scenario of how easy it is to make bad choices and do bad things, but if we would give our hearts to Jesus, it would be much easier to be forgiven and make better choices. So, every year we practiced for weeks on the music for this concert and then all the youth groups would go to Pigeon Forge for a weekend and work on the music together. It was the highlight of the year. But that year, I dreaded it. My youth group had a lot of drama going on and I had my fair share of it. We went to Pigeon Forge a deeply divided group. Like most groups there were the popular, charismatic kids and then there were my people, the shy, introverted kids who were just happy to be allowed to tag along...but we had our drama too.

What I remember about the time leading up to that trip and the first day of it, was praying that it would just all go away...all the hurtful actions and ugly names, all the sorrow for losing good relationships and the grief of knowing they couldn't be restored...and when you are 16 or 17 that feels like the end of the world. I remember praying that the people I was in conflict with would just forget about me and leave me alone. If I be left alone I could pretend everything was okay.

I'll never forget how that prayer was answered though. It came late one night, in the hotel conference center that sits on the bank of the Little Pigeon River. As I remember it, we were working on a song that spoke of the God's forgiveness...of the wideness of God's mercy and depth of Christ's love. And we weren't getting it. We were singing the notes, but we weren't getting their meaning. So, the man who was leading the workshop stopped and began to talk to us about the pain of broken relationships and how God feels sorrow when we are divided and can't find a way to love one another because of past hurts.

I remember that the air in the room became so heavy, suffocating us...pushing down on us with the weight of God's word. The leaders began to pray that we could see the truth of that song we had been practicing. Soon, I could hear people crying...I was crying. Suddenly, one person jumped up and ran from the room...the air too heavy and they couldn't take it anymore. Some friends jumped up and ran after them...but then we noticed that some who had been caught up in conflict with that group jumped up and ran as well. Soon, we were all on our feet, all headed out the door and it just now occurs to me to wonder what our counselors thought at that moment. They must have been thinking, what have we done, how are we going to pull this back together? But as I left the building, I noticed that we were all being pulled to the same place, to the river. We were all crying, we were all hugging each other, even people who had been sworn enemies 20 minutes ago. At one point, there I stood facing the person who had been tormenting me...and I'll be honest, it was only in that moment that I could recognize that we had been tormenting each other...our relationship had grown toxic and we were poisoning more than ourselves with it...we were convincing others to drink the poison. But that night we were able to cling to one another and say, "I'm sorry." We were able to receive and extend the kind of forgiveness that we had been singing about...and now our song would be sweeter because we had experienced its truth.

Often, when we pray, we are praying as if we have all the answers or as if we expect that God does and God will just handle it and leave us out of it. "God, I need you to just do 'a', 'b' and 'c'...and everything will be okay." Or, "God, just make this go away so I can move on." But God doesn't really work that way. God isn't a genie in a bottle, waiting for us to rub the lamp and so he can grant our wishes. If we look at the way Jesus prayed (see John 17), we see that his prayers were filled with a yearning for glory of God's offering of restoration. Jesus prays that others feel protected in God's

love, that they find joy in unity with God and with one another, that people are dedicated to truth over drama, and that love would be the cement of all relationships – both relationships with God and with others. I had prayed that our struggles would go away, God helped us to love them away. We prayed, but God’s answer was for us to act.

As we look at the entire saga of King David’s downfall and failures, we can see how many opportunities were available for David to offer prayers for people that might have restored relationships but there is no evidence that forgiveness or restoration was sought. David and his children did horrific things to one another and then they withdrew and let their hurt and hatred fester into all out war. Yet, in the midst of all that pain we can clearly see that David loved his children. He loved his family. He mourned the division and the hatred and the death of his son, but that just speaks clearly to the ongoing story of humanity – which is complex – we can love in the midst of hate, we can yearn for peace in the midst of chaos, but there must be as much energy put into love as there is into hate. There must be as much action that goes into creating peace as there is into creating chaos for relationships to be transformed.

Often, when pain and suffering come, we aren’t sure what to say or do so we manage to utter, “our thoughts and prayers are with you.” Yet David’s story reminds us: those thoughts, unless they translate to actions, are useless, and prayers, until they help us see the possibilities of those actions, both our action and God’s, are passive statements of hope but not a real commitment to let God transform us and the challenging relationships around us.

The thing about praying for people in ways that seek love and peaceful restoration is that it requires us to pray with our eyes open to our own culpability and actions. It requires us to pray in ways that seek understanding. It requires us to pray like Jesus, praying that in the fulfillment of that prayer God would be glorified, people would be protected, and joy would be shared, truth would be honored, and love would be the foundation for all of it.

On that night down by the Little Pigeon River, God was glorified in that we let the power of Christ’s forgiveness transform us...and our drama. We experienced the love of God in such a powerful way that we couldn’t help but look at one another through the lens of that love, and that brought a joy we didn’t know we had been missing. Our very divided youth group unified once more. The thing is, some of those relationships were not meant to be rekindled, but we at least could let forgiveness transform us in ways that allowed us to move on to healthier, more joyful relationships with others.

I saw a quote just this morning from Bishop Carter that said, “We not only need to love our neighbor, we need the love of our neighbor. King David’s family is a cautionary tale of letting toxic relationships and behaviors linger instead of praying that God can show

us better ways to love and be loved. Sometimes that means unity, and sometimes that means going our separate ways in peace...but always it should mean honoring truth and love that glorifies God.

In worship, we often pray for the state of the world and of relationships around us. We pray for peace, justice, an end to hatred and division...and those prayers are communal and wide-reaching. But we pray them, not just to drop it on God's doorstep and forget about it...we pray because in the act of talking to God about it, our eyes are open to see the struggles in new ways and to hear God's call to how we might live differently in the midst of those struggles.

Praying for people should be a transformative process turning the complexity of relationships into the simplicity of loving and being loved in ways that are protective, liberating, justice-seeking, and life-changing. It may not change the person we are praying for, but it may change us and how we respond.

God of mercy and Christ of love,
We bring before you the brokenness of the world,
and in doing so, understand that it will reveal our brokenness as well.
For where there is unrest, we hear your call for peace
Where there is injustice, we hear your call to live in just ways
Where there is hatred, we have seen your Son, who came to show us love.
Where there is division, we hear your call to be one
Where we have been taught to divide by race, religion, gender, and nationality, you
have challenged us to treat one another as we wish to be treated, and
taught us that how we treat others is a reflection of how we love you.
So, as we pray for peace, justice, love, and unity...we pray with eyes wide open to the
fact that you will use us to answer those prayers.
We do not feel adequate to that task...we worry we are not enough...
but in you, O God, we know all things are possible.
We pray for the world to be healed and accept that we are part of the solution on your
great work.
Amen.