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Good Shepherd Berkeley

Proper 8, Year B (RCL)

2 Samuel 1:1, 17-27; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 8:7-15; Mark 5:21-43

The rather gory reading we heard from 2 Samuel this morning reminds us that we are, once again, hearing the "greatest hits" of Old Testament history. We began last summer when the Revised Common Lectionary first offered us this option. I don't know whether we'll be as consistent about it this summer, but I'm glad that this passage, at least, has come up – a passage that never, I think, used to be read on Sunday mornings.

I'm glad to hear it for several reasons. For one thing, David's lament over Saul and Jonathan is a great piece of poetry, though it comes across better in the old King James version.

For another thing, here we are on Gay Pride Sunday hearing those lines addressed to Jonathan: "I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women." A lot of ink has been spilled "proving" that this can't be taken in a sexual sense. What a waste of energy! If the poem were found in any language of the world other than Biblical Hebrew, no one would raise a question about that.

That doesn't, of course, mean that David was a gay man in the modern sense. His history is full of heterosexual sex. But it reminds us that the ancient Israelite world was far more diverse than it wanted to admit – not unlike our modern world.

And, of course, this passage is *scripture* (just like the two verses from Leviticus that are so exercised about this very sort of thing). So that means that we wind up asking more of it than we might of, say, a play by Sophocles or an ode by Horace.

For this congregation, it may well be that the big problem with the passage isn't the love between David and Jonathan. We've dealt with that. It's all that sort of un-self-conscious enthusiasm for gore: "From the blood of the slain, from the fat of the mighty, the bow of Jonathan turned not back, the sword of Saul returned not empty."

I confess I've been finding this element in the scriptures more and more difficult to deal with over the last couple of decades, as we have watched antagonisms in the Near East harden into hatred and a seemingly unstoppable

downward spiral into total and unremitting war. It all feels far too much like the stories in Judges and 1 Samuel that lead up to this moment when David is about to be acknowledged as king of, first, Judah and then of all Israel.

And, yes, all of this is scripture, too. And David himself was very much of a piece with this whole picture. He was a warrior, like Saul and Jonathan. He was a guerrilla fighter, before there was such a term. He was a rebel and a renegade and, when he needed to be, a brigand. The best thing that can be said about him is that, when the time came, he was able to make the difficult switch from a fighter to a capable and just ruler.

But that's not all. There's another thing about David that keeps coming up. He's God's favorite, right from the start, from the time when Samuel insisted on anointing him and refused to go on with the sacrifice until they fetched him in from the flocks. (How many hours did that take?) David wasn't a nice man. He certainly wasn't a particularly pious man. But he was God's favorite, and he's the ancestor of the Messiah, the Christ. His place in our scriptural story is equal to that of Moses.

What on earth is that telling us?

Maybe, in part, it's reminding us of something we already know. That human life has more than one kind of beauty: there is a physical beauty and a moral beauty, an intellectual beauty and a spiritual beauty, a charismatic beauty that makes us look to certain people for leadership, a beauty of humility that makes us trust certain people. There are all kinds of beauty. And all of them are gifts from the Creator, who presumably takes delight in them all.

I understand why Deuteronomy and the Psalms insist that God loves the righteous and hates everybody else. But it isn't really that simple. We know this already from daily life. And if we do try to take refuge in our own efforts at perfection, sometimes all we wind up with is a kind of resentment because God doesn't seem to be taking us as seriously as we think we deserve.

I've been thinking and writing a bit about this, and -- I hope you won't mind -- I'm going to share with you a short passage out of a book that's coming out in December or January. It's a book of conversations with God, and this is the one about David:

[Here followed a poem from *Lovesongs and Reproaches* (due out in December or January from Morehouse Publishing) that questions God about God's favoritism for David and concludes that God loves every kind of beauty that God has implanted in us. Unfortunately, I can't reproduce this right now on account of copyright considerations.]

If we're trying to read the scriptures faithfully, we can't just try to clean up David's image, much less to clean up the incredible complexity of scripture in general. After all, the complexity is part of what makes the whole story so intriguing. A story where the central characters always behaved according to the rules and the wrong-doers were quickly punished would be really very boring. And we wouldn't believe it for a minute.

Our own stories are better than that. God's story is better than that. And when we turn to scripture, it isn't because we think we're going to get simplistic, pre-fabricated answers to our every quandary. We turn to it because it's full of real life and God is involved in it. And that can help us begin to see that God is involved in our real human lives, too.

Oh, and by the way, God is in love with you, too. And, nice and religious as you all are, that isn't the only reason. It probably isn't even the primary one.