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“To Be Loved Royally”

II Samuel 9, John 13:34-35

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English poet, John Drinkwater, said something to the effect that “great men are rare, poets are rarer, but the great man who is a poet is the rarest of all events.”

Some see greatness in wealth, but rare is the rich one well spoken. Through Nancy Gray, I have learned how articulate was John D. Rockefeller. He said, “I believe that every right implies a responsibility; every opportunity, an obligation; every possession a duty.”

Some see greatness in power, but rare is the politician whose power is expressed through eloquence. Winston Churchill stands out. Twice, I have visited the Churchill museum in London and both times spent hours listening to recordings of his speeches because I remain in awe of the way this leader, through his rhetoric, kept his nation united, strong and hopeful during unbelievable crisis. Here’s one of his less familiar quotes: “Things are not always right because they are hard, but if they are right, one must not mind if they are also hard.”

Some see greatness in fame, but rare are celebrities whose quotes are worth hearing. But Will Smith often surprises with his well-worded wisdom. Here’s a line: “Too many people spend money they haven’t earned, to buy things they don’t want, to impress people they don’t like.”

I shared these quotes because people worth listening to can be found in all kinds of places, and I don’t want to join the chorus of those who dismiss the rich, the powerful, the famous or any category of people. That said, given my interests and training, my personal delight in appreciating greatness usually does not begin with those who dominate the attention of People Magazine. I look for greatness in people of faith (which all three were). My particular bias is for people of faith who are scholars. And, with so many people of faith who are scholars lacking, as they say, “a way with words,” I am most delighted with the rare theologian who inspires as much by *how* something is said as by *what* is said.



Last week, we lost a theologian who was exceptional as both a scholar and as a wordsmith. Eugene Peterson spent a career serving a congregation and writing books that managed to honor both research and eloquence. His books were the result of careful exegesis, but they are so well written and are at the same time so personal, they usually are classified as devotional literature.

Peterson's most popular book is *The Message*, his translation/paraphrase of the Bible that has sold over 19 million copies. Here is how he translates the first beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God."

³"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

In Peterson's memory, I will read our passages for today from *The Message* and then follow with a sermon informed by his book on David titled, *Leap Over a Wall*.¹ I do this even though our passage from II Samuel is a story and doesn't provide Peterson with the best platform for his eloquence. Listen for God's Word first in the reading of II Samuel 9.

One day David asked, "Is there anyone left of Saul's family? If so, I'd like to show him some kindness in honor of Jonathan."

² It happened that a servant from Saul's household named Ziba was there. They called him into David's presence. The king asked him, "Are you Ziba?"

"Yes sir," he replied.

³ The king asked, "Is there anyone left from the family of Saul to whom I can show some godly kindness?"

Ziba told the king, "Yes, there is Jonathan's son, lame in both feet."

⁴ "Where is he?"

"He's living at the home of Makir son of Ammiel in Lo Debar."

⁵ King David didn't lose a minute. He sent and got him from the home of Makir son of Ammiel in Lo Debar.

⁶ When Mephibosheth son of Jonathan (who was the son of Saul), came before David, he bowed deeply, abasing himself, honoring David.

David spoke his name: "Mephibosheth."

"Yes sir?"

⁷ "Don't be frightened," said David. "I'd like to do something special for you in memory of your father Jonathan. To begin with, I'm returning to you all the properties of your grandfather Saul. Furthermore, from now on you'll take all your meals at my table."

⁸ Shuffling and stammering, not looking him in the eye, Mephibosheth said, "Who am I that you pay attention to a stray dog like me?"

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall; Earthly Spirituality for Everyday Christians*, Harper Collins, 1977.



⁹⁻¹⁰ David then called in Ziba, Saul's right-hand man, and told him, "Everything that belonged to Saul and his family, I've handed over to your master's grandson. You and your sons and your servants will work his land and bring in the produce, provisions for your master's grandson. Mephibosheth himself, your master's grandson, from now on will take all his meals at my table." Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants.

¹¹⁻¹² "All that my master the king has ordered his servant," answered Ziba, "your servant will surely do."

And Mephibosheth ate at David's table, just like one of the royal family. Mephibosheth also had a small son named Mica. All who were part of Ziba's household were now the servants of Mephibosheth.

¹³ Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, taking all his meals at the king's table. He was lame in both feet.

Now hear Peterson's translation of John 13:34-35:

³⁴⁻³⁵ "Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples—when they see the love you have for each other."

"You may eat at my table." That sounds gracious, until you remember from whom the invitation comes. How many powerful rulers are suspected to have killed at least one family member seen as a threat or inconvenience:

- Richard III having two nephews, both boys, murdered in their beds;
- Henry VIII's eliminating two wives by execution;
- Herod the King having his wife, Miriamne, killed out of jealousy; *then* their two sons, and *then* her mother for good measure;
- Suleiman, the Ottoman Emperor, making a habit of eliminating sons?

The list goes on, but I'll stop because we've heard enough to understand why Mephibosheth would not find being a part of the royal family as appealing as did Meghan Markle. Let's give him a break for shuffling, stammering, and not looking the king in the eye.

We might move beyond understanding to deep empathy if we considered more family history. Mephibosheth, after all, is the grandson of a previous king of Israel, King Saul, who tried mightily to have King David hunted down and killed. Though once an object of Saul's affection, Saul's heart had poisoned toward David when, after a victory over an army of Philistines, he heard the crowd chanting that Saul had killed his thousands and David his ten thousands- and after he saw beautiful women swoon over David and young men wanting to be like him. Jealousy was the poison that turned Saul's heart, and his attempts to have David killed sent David into exile. In the



bowed head of Mephibosheth, why wouldn't there be the suspicion that David would want the grandson of his rival killed?

Now add to Mephibosheth's fear and suspicion the poison of resentment. Mephibosheth walks with a severe limp. On that terrible day when his grandfather, Saul, and his father, Jonathan, were killed at Jezreel in a battle with Philistines, Saul's Jerusalem household was terrified. What would stop the now approaching Philistine army, or David's gorilla band, from killing them all? In the rush to escape the city, a nurse carrying the infant Mephibosheth tripped and both of the infant's ankles were broken... never healing properly.

Mephibosheth lost more than his mobility. He also lost the possibility of himself inheriting the throne. For years, he lived among those household exiles in a small village called Lo-debar. Peterson imagines these exiles doing what exiles do: waxing nostalgic about former glory days and recounting stories of their displacement and abasement. That seems to happen a lot these days, various groups finding ways to explain why they are victims and under attack. We tend to, as they say, "become what we eat." We also become what we believe.

So, here stands the victim, sought out by David's men, brought to David's palace, being told by the king *his own grandfather* tried to have killed, "Eat at my table." It is beyond Mephibosheth's imagination that he is there to be loved. At best, he is there *to be watched*.

David does what he can to overcome the mistrust. He restores to Mephibosheth all the lands once owned by his grandfather, Saul. He then makes available to Mephibosheth to work his lands Ziba with his large company of sons and servants.

You'll hear later that even with all of this, Mephibosheth may not be able to bring himself to trust all this royal love flowing his way.

Yet, David means it. That is how Peterson sees it, and is how I see it, too. In fact, David's shocking royal love shown toward one who could be viewed as a rival betrays something about David's character that shows itself throughout David's reign. In Israel's memory, he forever will be remembered as the "Shepherd-King" who defended justice and protected the weak.

That doesn't mean David never abuses his royal power. I won't re-tell the story of his affair with Bathsheba and then how he has her husband exposed in battle and killed. I will remind you, though, of how over and over again, David shows an amazing capacity for reckless love for those who might betray him, and even some who do.

It starts with Saul. David has opportunities to kill the king who is trying to kill him- even once having Saul at his feet when David sneaks into his camp when Saul is with a force pursuing him. All David does is cut a strip from Saul's robe.

It continues with Saul's son, Jonathan. As young men, Jonathan and David become fast friends. The last time they are together is when Jonathan helps David escape one of his father's attempts to have David killed. They make a vow to each other: "The Lord shall be between me and you, and between my descendants and your descendants, forever."² Jonathan dies in battle shortly thereafter, and David later keeps his vow by taking Mephibosheth into his home.

² 1 Samuel 20:42.



David shows the same love later to his own son, Absalom, who genuinely becomes a rival for the throne. Absalom pulls the classic stunt of
an Associate wanting to be the Senior,
a subordinate wanting to be boss,
a prince wanting to be king.

Absalom finds every person he can influence to offer sympathy if they have a gripe, offer a reason to gripe if they don't have one, and make the case that they- that the nation- would be so much better off if he were in charge. He builds an army of discontents, the easily led and the easily bribed. He then drives his father, David, out of Jerusalem and seemingly out of power. But as Assad did in Syria, the king on the way out fights his way back in. David regroups and takes back the capital and nation.

In the eyes of those loyal to David, Absalom deserves death. He certainly *does not* deserve to be loved. But when David's general, Joab, kills the traitor, David almost does not recover from his grief. What nearly breaks his heart beyond repair is not his son's betrayal, but his death.

And now let's get back to Mephibosheth. Let's go back to when David was driven out of Jerusalem by Absalom's army. When it is clear Jerusalem will fall, once again it becomes time for a king's household to flee. Only this time, Mephibosheth is not among those who leave.

When David realizes that Mephibosheth is not with him, he asks Ziba why. This is what Ziba says in Peterson's telling: "Mephibosheth has betrayed you; he saw a chance at becoming king and grabbed for it. But I'm on your side. I am with you through thick and thin."³

David believes him, and finally does the kind of thing one would expect a king to do in the face of betrayal. He vows that once he is king again, the lands of Mephibosheth will be handed over to Ziba.

But, when David does recapture Jerusalem, he discovers Mephibosheth as one with the look of mourning; "beard ragged and clothes looking as if they have been slept in."⁴ Mephibosheth tells David a different story, "that he had been all ready to join him that night in his flight from Jerusalem, but Ziba had betrayed him, leaving him behind, stranded without a mount (of course, unable to get about on foot)."⁵

Both stories can't be true. But David does an amazing thing. He drops it. The healing and reconciliation of his household and of his nation are more important than who did what, who lied about whom, and who is to be blamed. Both Mephibosheth and Ziba remain in his household. In like manner, David goes on to heal and unite his broken nation.

What flawed David demonstrates over and over again is a kind of love that he believes God had shown him. It is a love with no regard to shifting circumstances, hormones, emotion or personal convenience. The Hebrew word for it is *Chesed*. *Chesed* is:

- the kind of love with which "God so loved the world...."

³ Peterson, p. 177.

⁴ Peterson, p. 178.

⁵ Peterson, p. 176.



- “the kind of love to which we aspire when we take marriage vows to love ‘in sickness and health, till death do us part.’”⁶
- It is this kind of adopting love that gives content to the title Jesus is given when he is called the *Son of David*.

In Peterson’s view, we are all Mephibosheth. In our moral walk, we are crippled. We sometimes imagine ourselves victims who are denied, and sometimes imagine ourselves to be god-kings to whom all is owed. But we need the protection of the one we resent and who we would like to overcome. Our lives depend on a royal love so fierce that it makes family of those who sometimes betray that love.

That is the Gospel. That is why we call Jesus by these royal titles- why we call him “Lord,” “King of Kings,” and to the point of our story, “Son of David.” We are loved by a love that claims us and reconciles us and hopefully inspires us to follow David’s example and love as we have been loved. It is a love that draws us into church when we are inspired to worship and draws us to love our children and dearest friends even when they are not at their best.

There are those who say that it is naïve and unrealistic to carry such love beyond our interpersonal lives and into the public sphere. They say that such love has no place in halls of power. Yet, David’s story suggests otherwise, and history suggests otherwise. Look to the last couple of centuries for examples:

- Abraham Lincoln’s lack of post-war hatred and blame began the journey of our country’s healing, even if the seed of it almost died with his assassination;
- The disastrous policies of retribution after the first World War stand in contrast to the rebuilding policies following the Second World War that made friends of bitter enemies;
- The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* of South Africa showed the nation a better path than simple role reversal where the oppressed become the oppressors.
- Remember the Bosnian genocides? Realizing that primary blame for those dark times are with the political leaders who, for their own power purposes, stirred up fear and hatred among Muslims, Croats and Serbs, Bosnians are now for the most part striving to live in harmony as neighbors again.

We are Christian. We are a people whose hope is in the Royal Love of God. We are the people God has claimed in Jesus to be the means by which reconciling love can spread through and among us. I’m glad to be in that company, for to trust in the powerful, transformative, love of God is to trust in a power that can make of rivals, family again. Strong are the temptations in our world today to fuel and weaponize rivalries. May God’s royal love win in our homes, in our communities, in our nation and in the world.

Or, to add eloquence to that sentiment, “May the grace, mercy and peace of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit be at work among us and through us.” Amen.

⁶ Peterson, p. 173

