

A Place at the King's Table

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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2 Samuel 9:1-13

It's read aloud time in an elementary classroom. The teacher sits down in his rocking chair with the students gathered around on the floor, eager to hear what will happen next in their chapter book, *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*. The teacher begins to read about the latest adventure of Ralph, the mouse, when suddenly one of the student's hands shoots up in the air. He calls on her, and she says, "Wait a minute! Ralph no longer has his motorcycle? When did that happen?" The student, who recently returned from a week-long absence, missed a portion of the book and needed to get caught up on the details so she could once again fully engage with the story.

The same is true for us with our passage tonight. Before we can fully grasp this story, we need to take a look at details from two earlier events. One that needs our attention, which may seem like an unnecessary aside when read on its own, comes from 2 Samuel 4:4. There we read of a nurse who learned that Saul and Jonathan had died in battle. She quickly grabbed five-year-old Mephibosheth to get him into hiding, but in doing so, in her haste, she dropped him, and he becomes disabled, crippled in both feet for life.

The second event, going back a bit further in the David story, is the covenant he made with his good friend, Jonathan. In 1 Samuel 20, we read that Jonathan had David make an oath that he would show him "unfailing kindness like the Lord's kindness" (*hesed*) as long as he lived. He also had him promise to show that same kindness to his descendants.

God leads David to remember this covenant, this promise, at the beginning of our passage, a time when he has defeated his enemies and all is well in the kingdom. He then asks the question in verse 1, "Is anyone in Saul's family still alive; anyone to whom I can show kindness for the sake of my friend, Jonathan?" A servant of Saul's, Ziba, is summoned for the answer and appears before the king. "Are you Ziba?" David inquires. "I am," he replies, "at your service."

David asks his first question again in verse 3 and gets the answer he is looking for. "There is a son of Jonathan who is still alive," Ziba informs him, "though he is crippled in both feet." Mephibosheth is actually not only crippled physically, but also by his station in life. Think about it; he's lost his family, he's lost his wealth, and now he's living in exile in a home in another town. We might say that he is a rejected individual; one who has little value to most people, and he has no power to change his situation.

None of this matters to David, however, and he has him brought to him. Upon his arrival, Mephibosheth, this son of Jonathan and grandson of Saul, comes before David, likely in fear and trepidation. Because of that fear, and out of respect to the king, he bows low to the ground, an act that was likely very difficult and painful given his disability. And as he does this, thoughts run through his mind, and his heart begins to race. "Why have I been called here?" he wonders, and "what is King David going to do with me?" He even wonders if he is about to lose his life.

We may think that Mephibosheth is having a panic attack and that his concerns are unfounded, but his questions are fair ones since it was commonplace in the ancient world for a new king to kill all the remaining descendants of the previous dynasty so that there would be no challenge to the throne.

While most of us have not faced the threat of being killed by someone, we have all had times when we are nervous, when our thoughts are racing, and when we wonder what lies ahead. I think, for example, of times when my principal would pop her head in my classroom, usually while I was busy teaching or working with the kids, and would say, "Can you stop in my office when you get a chance?" And before I had the opportunity to ask what it was about, she was gone, leaving me to wonder what I had possibly done wrong or what parent might be upset about something. Now to be honest, she was one of the best principals I had during my 26 years of teaching, but that was not her finest trait.

While most of my experiences with her turned out to be of no concern, there are times in our lives when the concern is valid, when our fear and trepidation have merit: like when a doctor calls you in for an

appointment, and at the appointment you hear the word cancer; when a boss sets up a meeting, and at that meeting you learn that your services are no longer needed; when a child or grandchild wants to talk sometime, and when that conversation takes place, she informs you that she's not sure she believes in God anymore and really has no need for the church.

Fear and trepidation were also felt by an elderly woman in New York City on a cold night back in January of 1935. She lived in the poorest ward of the city and was accused of stealing a loaf of bread. Wearing just tattered clothes, despite the frigid weather, she was hauled into night court to face the charges and stand before the judge, only the judge that night was actually New York City's mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia. You see he liked to get out of the office at times and try out other roles in the city: riding with the fire trucks, accompanying the police on raids, and tonight, he sent the judge home for the evening and took over the bench himself.

The woman tried to explain that her daughter's husband had deserted her, that her daughter was sick, and that her grandchildren were starving, but the shopkeeper would have none of it. "She's guilty!" he declared. "This is a really bad neighborhood, your honor. She's got to be punished so we can teach a lesson to the other people living around here." As she listened to those words, while staring down at her well-worn shoes, fear and trepidation filled her heart, just like the fear and trepidation that filled the heart of Mephibosheth.

But what Mephibosheth hears from the mouth of David is not words that cause him fear but words that surprise him with hope. "Do not be afraid, Mephibosheth," David says to him in verse 7, "I intend to show kindness to you because of my promise to your father, Jonathan. I will give you all the property that once belonged to your grandfather, Saul. And not only that, you will eat with me here at the king's table, just like one of my own children."

Do you hear what God leads David to say to Jonathan? Notice the three things. First, he will shower him with his love, his kindness. That word for love, *hesed*, is almost untranslatable. It's covenant love. It's steadfast love. It's what the translators of the King James Version of the Bible coined *lovingkindness*. It's a word that reflect the heart of the giver, the one showing the kindness. And David showers this love to Mephibosheth not because of anything he has done, but because of his connection to his father, Jonathan, and because of what he had done.

Second, he tells Mephibosheth that he will make him rich by restoring to him all the land of his grandfather, Saul. This is a lot of land, and in this culture, land was power; land was equivalent to wealth. David is saying, in other words, that by my act of love, I will move you from poverty to great riches.

The third and final thing he promises to Mephibosheth is that he will adopt him into his family. That's what it means when he says that he will always eat at my table. In essence, David is saying, "You will live in my court. You will banquet at my table. You will be my son."

Mephibosheth is shocked. He does manage to bow once more before the king, but then he exclaims in verse 8, "Who am I that you would turn your attention to a dead dog such as I?" In other words, he is saying, "Your majesty, I do not deserve this. I am nothing, and I have nothing. How can it be that I should be the recipient of such kindness?"

Beginning with verse 9, David begins to act on his commitment to love, to shower him with riches, and to adopt Mephibosheth into his family. He summons Ziba once again and informs him of what is to happen. "You, your 15 sons, and your 20 servants are to farm the land to produce food for your master's grandson and his household. And as for Mephibosheth, he will always have a place at my table."

Being showered with kindness is not what the elderly woman in New York City expected either that cold winter night. The judge, or actually, the mayor, listened carefully to the shopkeeper's accusation, but then as he turned to the woman, he sighed deeply, and said, "I have to punish you. The law makes no exceptions. It's either a ten-dollar fine or ten days in jail." But even as the mayor was pronouncing the sentence, God led him to reach into his pocket and extract a 10-dollar bill. "Here is the fine which I now remit," he said. "The punishment has been paid."

"Furthermore," he added, "I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom 50 cents for living in a town where a person needs to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines, and give them to the defendant, who, I hope, will be done with stealing." The following day, the New York City

newspapers reported that \$47.50 was turned over to a bewildered elderly lady who had stolen a loaf of bread to feed her starving grandchildren.

This woman had nothing to offer to ease her predicament nor to change her place in life. She was entirely dependent on the grace shown to her by the substitute judge that night, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia. The same was true, of course, for Mephibosheth, who was entirely dependent on the kindness that God led David to show him.

If we're honest, we must admit that we are a room filled with Mephibosheths. We are fearful, broken, and living in a place that is not our home. Despite this, we have an advantage over Mephibosheth and the elderly woman, for our hope does not depend on flawed human beings, however, kind or loving they may be at times. For even David, later in the story when he is tricked by Ziba in chapter 16, defaults on his covenant with Jonathan (2 Samuel 16:1-4).

No, our hope is in the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, our Savior, Jesus Christ, the one who is completely trustworthy all the time, the one who never defaults on his covenant. As we stand before him, we have nothing to offer to make us worthy of his love, to make us deserving of his riches, or to have him adopt us as his own. We could say like Mephibosheth, "How can it be that you would turn your attention to a sinner like me?"

But God, through the sacrifice of his Son, makes us his sons and his daughters anyway, and then he says to us, "Come, lay aside your fears, and have a seat at the King's table to experience the richness of my love." In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen. ©Chad Boorsma