

Hanging Between Heaven and Earth, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 10080813
2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33 and Ephesians 4:25-5:2
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The Bible, although full of spiritual inspiration and the word of the love of God, also contains stories of sex and violence, rivaling the worst of what we see on TV or on the movie screen. Unfortunately for us, seldom are these stories described within the context of the Bible's primitive and male dominated culture— a culture where disputes were settled by the sword – a culture from which God has graciously led us away.

It was a culture in which women were possessions of men and were generally unmentioned. When you hear someone disparaging the feminist movement, consider Jesus as the first feminist who welcomed women among his disciples and said they were equally as important as men as children of God.

Today's story from the Old Testament involves a woman, the abuse of whom, set in motion a series of military and political events. Difficulties within the ruling royal family spilled over into the public arena.

Who was Absalom who was left hanging between heaven and earth? He was king David's handsome and ambitious son, his third son. Absalom's sister Tamar was raped by their half-brother Amnon who was David's oldest son. Because of David's inaction, Absalom took the law into own hands and killed Amnon, his half-brother, the rapist. You can call Absalom anything but indecisive. His responses were quick and exacting— the kind of responses that many businesses look for today in young upwardly-mobile executives and managers – the kind of responses that cause middle easterners to kill in the name of honor.

One factor that made Absalom handsome was his beautiful hair. He had lots of it. When he annually cut his hair, he weighed it, which says something about his personality. When he did, it came to six pounds! Absalom stole the hearts of the people and then began a revolt. He set up a rival government to the south in Hebron. This eventuated a war which took place between the forces of Absalom and those of his father, King David, and resulted in the death of the brash young one. As his mule rode beneath an oak tree, Absalom's beautiful hair got caught, hung him up, and the mule went on. He was left hanging between heaven and earth. Absalom became an easy target for general Joab's spears.

All these problems were within David's family: David, God's specially-anointed king of God's specially- anointed nation. Human failures can take place in spite of God's high calling.

David's was a dysfunctional family, to say the least. Half-brother Amnon the raper only acted as his father had a generation before. Here is an example of problems plaguing a family generation after generation. This whole royal family was a family hanging somewhere between heaven and earth: called by God to act as God's representatives; yet tempted to act in the worst of human ways involving lust, greed, jealousy, and murder.

The church hangs somewhere between heaven and earth. Well, I hope we don't act as viciously and immorally as Israel's royal family did. I hope we aren't as brash as young Absalom was, as lustful as Amnon was, or as violent as Joab was, but we usually hang somewhere between the high callings of God and the low behaviors of humanity. We are called by God to act with love, compassion, acceptance, and giving, yet we as a community of faith, and as individuals often find ourselves judging, excluding, taking, and hating.

Our expression of anger can be one of those failures. We get taken up with violence. We love

a good fight on the Nascar track. We take sides in a little league baseball game. It is okay to be angry, but it is not okay to hurt others in our anger.

It is easy for church people to speak sanctimoniously in the abortion debate. We forget that the young woman involved is a person who needs compassion, understanding and support no matter what her decision might be. We forget that every newborn has a right to be wanted and prepared for.

It is easy for church people to judge a person on his or her sexual orientation, even using the Bible as a bludgeon to enforce attitudes based on fear and prejudice. We are called to something higher than that. We are called to look at people through the eyes of God and to discover that all are children of God.

Human dilemmas are rarely clear-cut. The older king David knew that, and waited patiently while the younger Absalom plowed ahead acting from what he thought was the moral high ground. This created more pain.

The church hangs somewhere between heaven and earth. As humans, we are subject to our base instincts, doing what we see everyone else doing. Isn't that what we tell the judge about the speeding ticket? Yet, Jesus Christ calls for something better.

The author of Ephesians reminds the church of the heaven part of its calling: "Put away bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, slander, and malice."¹ We are called to "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven" us. Live in love as Christ has loved us. Our task is to build up each other and the church.

We hang somewhere between heaven and earth. While war, starvation, and disease rage in the world around us, we support peace, relief, and healing efforts through our gifts to Church World Service, One Great Hour of Sharing, and Our Church's Wider Mission. While a man lies in a hospital bed seeking recovery, the church supports him and his family through care and prayer. While people find themselves homeless, church members prepare meals for the homeless shelter.

Hanging there between heaven and earth, we become easy targets for the spears of the culture around us. Some come from those who don't believe in God. Others come from the religious right who say we are not decisive enough in judging the morality of others.

We must support and encourage each other as we follow God's high calling. Hanging somewhere between heaven and earth, we know we are human, subject to human passions, pressures, and emotions, but we also know we are created in God's image, and God calls us live by higher standards.

We're hanging between heaven and earth, but we are not left dangling helplessly. Though our feet are near the ground, our arms reach toward our creator to receive the wonderful gift of love. While we are dangling, Jesus Christ holds and supports us.

¹ Ephesians 4:31-32