

Lectionary: 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Psalm 24; Ephesians 1:3-14; Mark 6:14-29

A Truly Royal Family

Good morning and happy World Cup Final Day. I don't know about you, but I've enjoyed following the Football (i.e. Soccer) World Cup tournament this year and even watching a few of the games, when I get a chance. It's a little hard to do when they play at 10 or 11 in the morning and 2 in the afternoon, our time, but even the tape delay replays have been fun to watch, knowing the outcome notwithstanding, because the players are so energetic and are trying so hard to make plays, to score and defend, all in the hope of advancing to the next stage of the tournament.

And today, after all the drama and buildup of more than 4 weeks of competition, the final match is being played... mighty France against tiny Croatia. It was scheduled to start at 11, so both sides are probably on the pitch right now, vying for the right to hold the cup for the next 4 years. No matter who wins, it's been a wonderful display of the world coming together in peaceful competition, with displays of national pride mixed with good sportsmanship.

France has been there before, winning the cup in 1998 and playing in the finals in 2006 and now again this year. A football powerhouse. A goliath of the pitch. Croatia only became an independent nation in 1991 and with a population of 4 million is 1/15th the size of France. Do you even know where Croatia is? I had an idea that it was in the Balkans, but had to look it up anyway. It's a little crescent shaped country on the northeast coast of the Adriatic, bordered by Bosnia and Herzegovina to the south, Slovenia and Hungary to the north, and Bosnia to the east.

So the stage is set... can Croatia, like David vs. Goliath, pull the ultimate upset? Wouldn't it be fun to see all Croatia rejoicing as the World Cup is brought to Zagreb, it's capital, like all Israel and David in our reading this morning, dancing with joy before the Lord as the ark is brought up, after a great victory, to its new place in Jerusalem, the new city of David?

Have you ever wondered, even for a moment, what it would be like to be royalty? Ever indulged in a daydream that you're really the child of a king or a queen? Did you watch some of the recent royal wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markel, maybe even just the sermon, and wonder what it would be like to be part of that family?

In today's first reading from Samuel and our gospel lesson from Mark, we get a glimpse into the lives of two royal families. Neither has a happy, fairy tale ending. Both may leave us wondering what it might really mean to be part of a royal family.

The first couple, in our Old Testament lesson, is King David and Michal, his wife, who was the daughter of King Saul. If we know the backstory of Michal and David, there's a line in this lesson that really sticks out. It's when Michal looks out the window and sees David dancing before the Lord. And then we hear, "*and she despised him in her heart.*" The line should break our hearts a little because this is not the happy story that their romantic beginnings portended.

Michal was the second daughter of King Saul. Saul had vowed that whoever killed Goliath would obtain his first daughter in marriage. You remember Goliath, the gigantic Philistine warrior David brings down with a slingshot and a stone? But when David kills Goliath, Saul is jealous of David and reneges on his vow and marries the older daughter to someone else.

Turns out that's good news for Michal, because, the Bible says, "Michal loved David" (1 Samuel 18:20). Michal loved David. When her father Saul finds this out, he decides to use this to his advantage in his hostility toward David. He tells David he can have Michal as his wife – he can marry into the royal family – if David kills one hundred Philistines. [What the Bible actually says is that David is required to bring Saul the foreskins of one hundred Philistines (1 Samuel 18:25), but don't imagine one hundred Philistines are going to let David get away with just that piece of them.] Saul is certain David will end up the victim of some really cranky Philistines, but David actually kills two hundred. He gets to marry Michal.

Michal loved David. Saul sends his soldiers to kill David, but Michal protects him. She lowers David out the window, then dresses up an idol like David, complete with his clothes and a goat-hair wig, puts it in bed, and pulls the covers over it. Saul's soldiers burst into the room, pull back the covers, and—no David (1 Samuel 19:11-17).

With David on the run, Saul gives Michal in marriage to someone else. And in the meantime, David also takes a couple more wives. One section I reread from earlier in 2 Samuel talks about David at Hebron have six sons by six different women!

Michal loved David. But we never hear that David loved Michal.

Eventually, David becomes king and demands Michal back. Maybe it was love after all. Maybe it was just getting back what belonged to him.

We aren't told when exactly Michal stopped loving David. Maybe it was when they were separated, and she didn't know what had happened to him. Maybe it was when he took her back from a man who begged him not to. Maybe it was when she met the other wives he had married in the meantime. What we do know is that **on this day**, watching David dance for the Lord with joyful abandon, she sees David and she hates him.

After the dancing, David throws a dinner for all the people, and then, in the **next** section after our reading **this morning** ends, David goes back to his home. Michal meets him out front and tells him he's made a fool of himself, dancing like that, so un-kinglike, and in front of the servants' maids too. David says, basically, "Well, I was dancing for the Lord, the one who made me king instead of your father, and I'm going to do a lot more embarrassing and debasing things than this, but, sure, **like you yourself said**, I'll be a hit with the servant maids" (2 Samuel 6:21-22).

David was a great king, but a great husband? Michal might say not. No fairytale "happily ever after" here.

King Herod, in our gospel lesson, has **his own** troubles in the marriage and family department. He has divorced his first wife and married Herodias, his brother-in-law's wife. Since his brother-in-law was still alive at the time, this was against Jewish law, and John the Baptist calls him on it. Herod is supposed to be keeping Jewish law, not flouting it. But neither Herod nor Herodias like John the Baptist criticizing their marriage in public, so John the Baptist rots in jail.

That is until, as we hear in the flashback story from Mark, King Herod throws himself a birthday party and makes a promise that is supposed to make him seem like a big man... a stupendous, powerful man. He promises to give his stepdaughter whatever she asks because her dancing has pleased him so much. Herodias sees her chance, not to change her husband's mind about John the Baptist, not to practice

good conflict resolution skills and see if they can come to some compromise about John, but to get rid of this meddlesome prophet once and for all. And big macho man Herod doesn't have the guts to say no, to go back on his word in front of his guests, even though, as we hear, that Herod knew John "was a righteous and holy man, and he protected him. When [Herod] heard him. he was greatly perplexed; and yet he liked to listen to him".

Herodias tells her dancing daughter to ask for the most repulsive possible dish at a dinner party—John the Baptizer's head on a platter. So, check out these royal family values: Herodias is willing to use her daughter to get the horrific thing she wants. Herod would rather be taken for a murderer than a fool. The daughter doesn't seem to have the moral sense to recognize she's being used to commit a horrific tragedy.

So much for fairytales. Our own families may not include utter hatred or gatherings that descend into murder, but we've all had our experiences of people who are supposed to be partners becoming enemies, of people using one another, people feeling discarded, or being manipulated. We know deep in our bones that *this isn't what families are for*.

In today's Epistle lesson, Paul's wonderful introduction to his letter to the Ephesians, we hear God's plan for an alternative family, a different kind of royal family in which we are adopted as God's own children through Jesus Christ. Our inheritance as members of this family is redemption, forgiveness, and knowledge of God's will and God's desire to gather all things on heaven and earth together in Christ. No divisiveness. No abuse or manipulation. No discarding of people or disregard of feelings. No using of others. Rather... Love that endures. Love that shows forth, not in empty promises or dangerous ones, but in praise. In baptism, we have been adopted into God's family, the ultimate royal family. As members of God's family, we are loved beyond all knowing and with a love that can reach out in love and service to others, even to the puzzling person we're seated across from at the dinner table every night or attend church with every Sunday.

What happens next in Mark's gospel, right after today's lesson, right after Herod's horrible feast, is that Jesus throws a dinner party. It's the Feeding of the More than Five Thousand, and it's completely different from Herod's feast. There's no guarded palace, just a beautiful open field where all are welcome. There's no head table; everyone is a guest of honor. There's no boasting, just thanksgiving. There's no pompous vow-making and self-aggrandizement, just simple food, blessed, broken, and shared, and enough for all. No horrible silver platter of death, just twelve baskets full to the brimming with abundant life-giving bread and fish.

At which royal family table would you rather dine? Our feast has been prepared for us by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. The door is open and all are welcome. The host, the ruler of heaven and earth, awaits with open arms.

~ Amen

Portions in blue were taken or paraphrased from a Sermons That Work homily written for today by The Rev. Amy Richter, Ph.D., an Appointed Missionary for the Episcopal Church, with Episcopal Volunteers in Mission.