

HOW HAVE THE MIGHTY FALLEN

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

The reading from the book of Samuel was of an elegy most certainly written by David memorializing the old King Saul and his son Jonathan, who had both been slain in a terrible battle with the Philistines. Saul's story in the first book of Samuel is the story of the change from a tribal society to a more settled kingdom. Saul was the first king who did a great deal to create a stable and unified society that could withstand the pressures from strong enemies, like the Philistines. Saul was a powerful figure who began the process of centering power in the divinely appointed leader; he was a warrior who at first encouraged David to fight at his side. But Saul was also a flawed character. As time went by he grew jealous of David's success and a mean and spiteful character started to emerge. David's elegy comes after Saul and his son were killed in a fierce battle leaving the Israelite tribe without a leader. David mourns the loss of Saul, and his good friend Jonathan. But there is in this elegy that repeated haunting line: "How have the mighty fallen." This is a phrase that has echoed down the ages and one, which each one of us has at some time used about some tragic figure. For the phrase states succinctly the heart of the tragic. The great and mighty have no longer great and mighty. How have the mighty fallen.

We are used to funeral orations in which the past is remembered without any of the blemishes that might have colored the life of the one remembered. We remember the good and praise those good works forgetting the difficult moments from the past. On the passing of our heroes we concentrate on the great deeds and lavish our praise on the contributions to our lives and the life of our nation. They stand tall in our memories and we let the careful parsing of their lives to some future historian.

But look at what David does in this wonderful elegiac poem. There is respect, there is thankfulness, there is even deep love expressed here, but there is that repeated line which touches a deeper truth – the line that has echoed through time – "How have the mighty fallen." The first king of this struggling people who, through his mighty deeds, has moved a tribe to a small, but in its way, a nation to be respected, surely must be given high praise due to a hero. But there is that phrase – How have the mighty fallen.

David in this one repeated phrase underscores the tragic nature of life. It conjures up not only the tragic death of a hero but also the nature of our flawed and impermanent human life. David paints the picture of the tragedy of human life itself. For all its pretensions, for all its trust in progress or trust in accomplishment the nature of life has to be judged by a divine measurement, and not by human measures alone. David does praise the heroism of Saul and Jonathan, but it is a praise that is tempered by divine judgment, a judgment that is present in the human predicament.

The echo of the judgment that David brings with this repeated refrain comes from an understanding about the nature of life and the nature of the world in which we live. We would not bring judgment on a fallen hero was it not that there is a flaw in the very nature of our being human. Adam's curse is the very human failure of assuming that we desire absolute power. Saul's jealousy of David came from his desire to keep all the kingly power to himself.

The power of this insight into human character, its power and its failure, has been a constant theme in Western literature. Shakespeare's greatest works are his Tragedies. The rise and fall of Macbeth, with his desire for power, the jealousy of Othello, who claimed Desdemona for himself, of them we could say with David: "How have the mighty fallen." In our own American literature the figure of Ahab stands out – Ahab's obsessive desire is to gain the elusive triumphant end in the defeat of the great white whale and it is in his achievement of the goal that Ahab meets his own tragic end.

Human life is tragic because our grasp exceeds our reach. We aim for the stars and barely reach the highest hill. Even our comedies have this touch of the tragic. There is a wonderful small movie that came out several years ago with the wonderful title "The Welshman who went up a hill and came down a Mountain". It is a movie about a small Welsh village nestled at the base of a small mountain that is revered by the villagers. The Ordnance Survey surveyors come to the village to determine whether their mountain was high enough to

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have its name printed on the new maps. They find that it is 50 feet short of the 1,000 feet necessary to classify it as a mountain and so must be designated as a hill, and thus not named on the maps. Through many humorous devices they keep the surveyors occupied in the village, and the local minister gathers the villagers together to carry earth to the top of the hill so that they can achieve the necessary height. As they get to the 1,000-foot level the exertion causes the minister to have a fatal heart attack, and they lay him to rest at the top of their now designated mountain. The death is both heroic and tragic, we reach the heights of human endeavor, but those heights cannot bring us into the realm of the gods.

It's all about identity in the end. Who do we think we are? Saul thought that he *was* Israel. Ahab's whole being was given meaning by that one thing – killing the white whale. We are all taken up into this current fall from grace of the South Carolina Governor. The fall is heavy because as a human being he forgot that responsibility and promise-giving matter and that he is not above them. Assuming we own our own moral life and can create our own moral standards pushes us into the realm of the gods!! Tragedy strikes when we find that it is not so. In our awareness of the tragic we are aware of our distance from God, we yearn, not for his presence, but for his power and glory and wish to take them for ourselves. Becoming aware of the distance between who we are and what we would hope to be is vital for our lives. We become aware of this distance when we discern a higher power than ourselves. In the words of the poet: “the darkness is the deepening shadow of your presence.” (Thomas, p 102)

But that presence has healing powers. There is hope for us when we reach out to that presence expecting nothing but having accepted the reality of our circumscribed lives. This surely is the point of the story in Mark about the woman who reaches out to touch Jesus in the midst of the crowd pressing about him. A woman in her condition would have been condemned as unclean and unworthy. Yet in hope she reached out yearning for a return to wholeness and acceptance. Without expectations and with nothing more than her own feeble reaching out to touch his robe a moment of grace opened up for her she is given a new life. The healing lies in the acceptance of our reality.

But what can we say of Jesus? Was not this a tragic life? I have said that the literature of tragedy has been a hallmark of our Western literary tradition, but this central book of our Christian life – what we call the New Testament – is not a tragedy. The Cross is not tragic, but triumphant in its sorrow. This is the mystery of the Cross. Jesus has no presumption of glory as he takes that terrifying journey to Jerusalem. In the garden his prayer is not that what he wants and desires should be fulfilled, but that God's will be paramount. There is an emptying out of the self, and not a clamor for self-affirmation. The phrase that strikes one so forcibly in the reading from Paul's letter to the Corinthians is: “though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor.” The Cross is not a tragic event because there was never presumption on the part of Jesus. We are saved from the tragedy of our lives by gift of grace. We think we have our claims to a good life, we think we have our just deserts, but we are placed in check-mate by one who empties himself to show us the power of grace – a power that we covet, but cannot own. The woman was healed, not because she demanded it, not because she thought she was worth it, but because the very nature of healing was in the giving. The act of giving his life on the Cross is that act of giving a whole new way of looking at life itself. Our identity as individuals is not tied up with our own passions, desires, hopes, nor is it tied to our social or economic position. But how tempting it is to think our selves superior if one has superior rank. It is in this delusion that two of our Governors seem to have become figures of tragic-comedy. It is in the loss of self that one discovers the self.

The public confessions by our distraught politicians, which seem to be the contemporary version of the puritan's stocks in the market square, point to an understanding that there is a sense of moral failure which rests upon a recognition that there are standards of human behavior that rise higher than our practice. There is therefore a public confession of shame that one has failed, not merely one's family and friends, but humanity itself. But the expression of shame does not really go far enough – any more than the old confession of sin in the tents of the revivalist. And it does not go far enough because it simply becomes a cover for a self that still needs to express its own importance. It is only in the loss of self-pride that a new life is possible.

This is a tremendously hard lesson to learn. But it is the heart of the Gospel. We discover our true identity when we encounter the one “who though he was rich, for our sakes became poor so that through his poverty ‘we’ might become rich.”

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There is no demand here that we follow any moral law, that we abase ourselves before an alter of purity. We are simply faced with the reality of one who in an act of total giving draws us to himself to enable us to accept our lives as incomplete, but are completed in the acceptance of his presence in our lives.

This giving up of the search for a self in the world around us does not mean that we give up the world. We are more alive to the world and its problems because we look at it now from the perspective of one who has come and has given much for us. We now know what it is to give of ourselves to those about us. Christianity is not about going to church and being religious. It is about being a community of those who have been grasped by this startling idea – that God has given himself so that we can find the importance and wonder of life. Morality now becomes the way of life without our own self being the center of gravity. It is as we lose ourselves in the work to which we are called that we will find who we really are. This is dedication, and this is true commitment. It is not for ourselves that we work, but for others.

This then should be our prayer, in the words of the old hymn:

Take Thou our minds, dear Lord
We humbly pray
Give us the mind of Christ each passing day.
Teach us to know the truth that sets us free
Grant us in all our thoughts to honor Thee

Take Thou our-selves, O Lord, heart, mind and will;
Through our surrendered souls Thy plans fulfill.
We yield ourselves to Thee – time, talents, all;
We hear, and henceforth heed, Thy sovereign call.

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