

## Blood

*"Yeah we were laughing and drinking, nothing feels better than blood on blood..."*

*Bruce Springsteen, Highway Patrolman.*

In 1982 Bruce Springsteen released a solo album that was noticeably different from what he had done before with the E Street Band. There were no towering arena rock anthems that fans of the Boss had come to expect. There were no radio hits like the ones that would come from his iconic *Born in the USA* two years later. *Nebraska* is a brooding and often dark work that shows us a rock and roller coming into his own as a songwriter. The songs on *Nebraska* tell stories about the underside of America. The only song that even flirts with a poppy hook, *Atlantic City*, is not an enthusiastic endorsement of the glitz and glamour of the Casinos and the boardwalk, it's about the desperate and woeful side of what happens in AC and Vegas: "Everything dies, baby that's a fact, but maybe everything that dies someday comes back."

But the song that always hits me like a freight train is called "Highway Patrolman." It's told from the perspective of a small town state trooper. It starts, "My name is Joe Roberts, I work for the state, I'm a sergeant out of Perrinville, Barracks number 8. I always done an honest job, as honest as I could, I got brother named Frankie, and Frankie ain't no good." The story is that when the family farm went under, Frankie enlisted in the Army and went to Vietnam and Joe became a policeman. Frankie had always been wild and Joe had always been the caretaker: "I catch him when he's straying, like any brother would, man turns his back on his family, well he just ain't no good."

The Chorus of the song goes like this: "Well we were laughing and drinkin' nothing feels better than blood on blood..." It's a song about how the bonds of family can be stronger than justice, stronger than duty. It doesn't glorify the hard choices that sometimes get made when blood is thicker than water, but if you listen to it you realize that what Joe goes through dealing with his brother is a pretty important and maybe universal reality: there really is nothing quite like blood.

As I read these texts for this week, from John's Gospel and from the Letter of John, I was struck by the relationship that is being described between God and Jesus and ourselves: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you, abide in my love." Now there are two kinds of love that come into the discussion here, both are important, but the one that is used most frequently is *Agape*, you have probably heard somewhere before that *Agape* is the highest form of love, it is the form of love that God has for us, it is self-sacrificial love, as Jesus describes, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down ones life for one's friends." But the word "friends" isn't strong enough I don't think. The Greek word is *Philon*, which you might recognize from some of our words like Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love. So what I would say is a better reading of "friends" is brothers, or sisters, or even siblings. I say this here because the relationship of God as Father is so strongly emphasized, and in John's Letter he emphasizes that Jesus "came by water and the blood, not with the water only, but with the water and the blood."

Over the years I have heard and read about how *Agape* and *Philiios* are two different things, and maybe in the story of Jesus and Peter where Jesus keeps asking Peter if he has *Agape* for him and Peter replies with *Philiios*, it is a relevant distinction, but here I think Jesus is actually saying that there is a blood connection involved in this self-sacrificial connection that we have with God and God has with us.

If you read the Scripture with an eye to the relationship that God always wants with people, you will notice that God wants children, heirs, even brothers and sisters. People keep insisting that we should be servants and subjects, that we should grovel in awe of the Creator, but God insistently wants to get us up off of the ground and tell us that we are an embodiment of love.

So this is where I think of *Highway Patrolman*, Frankie, indeed, ain't no good. I know what it's like to have a brother that seems bent on getting into trouble and who just can't seem to "walk the line." I know what it's like to put yourself out there again and again and to know that if it was any other man, you just wouldn't put up with it. And I know that nothing really does feel as good as blood on blood, and I live with an absence because of that. I know you can also fight with your brother pretty intensely and maybe even hold some grudges, but there is always the blood. This is why it's important to remember that Jesus came by water and blood, and I know you might not necessarily get the full weight of that and it might just sound like a bunch of religious talk, but let me tell you it's really important. The bond of water is John's baptism, the bond of water is the rituals of the law, water is not for nothing, water cleans us, moves our history and shapes our landscape, but blood is thicker and deeper. Jesus came by water, he came into the world to make a ripple in the ocean of history. But he also came by the blood, being an actual human with all that that entails to show us that we are not just sacks of water with delusions of divinity. We are children of God, we are "friends," brothers (or sisters) even, we are heirs to the kingdom of God not just subjects. This "commandment" to love one another is not just another law, it is a connection, a relationship, it is blood.

"Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ, has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child." The stakes are nothing less than victory that conquers the world, because if we love like this describes then we see that we are all brothers, we are all connected in love because we have one Creator. If we miss this connection between love and God and us, our waters will always be troubled and our blood will always be at odds. But if we love like we're blood, then we will "conquer the world."