

Notes for Brian's Sermon at Brentwood Presbyterian Church

Sun, July 29, 2018

Can We Talk to God about Our Sin? (Psalm 51)



Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.
(Ps 51:1-2)

A lesson from the psalm

I played golf and had dinner with a long-time friend on Friday – he is an avowed humanist – rejected the narrow dogmatism of his Christian roots in southern California – a view of the world that he held through his doctoral work in psychology at Fuller Seminary – he became a friend when he counseled me through a particularly rough patch in my faith journey during which I faced up to a particularly virulent form of rebellion against God in my life – so, this is a special relationship – he's writing a book on the humanist worldview, so that was the focus of much of our conversation – I found his image of the God he has rejected fascinating – he called it 'the Eye in the sky' – I worked that into our prayer of approach and confession this morning – partly because I don't think he's alone in this view, especially among those who have left the church – I tell you that story because I think this psalm speaks of a different God – it witnesses to a God who forgives and delights when we accept that forgiveness with a gratitude that changes our lives – changes that produce progress rather than perfection – progress in participating in and contributing to the Commonwealth of God – a deepening intimacy with a God who will listen to our inner agony, no matter how it arises and shapes us, with loving and forgiving patience

Provocative points to ponder

- I don't think God gets angry at our sinfulness – God is not outraged at our multileveled rebellions against the beneficial contributions God designed us to make to the well-being of creation – I know there are writers in the Bible who suggest that, but I think something deeper and more lasting than anger is happening - I think God gets sad – God's heart breaks – this week the Spirit drew my attention to a book called *Consolations* (2015) by David Whyte – a poet and writer who lives in the San Juan Islands – he writes about human heartbreak, but I couldn't help but think of God's role in this dynamic - "Heartbreak is an indication of our sincerity: in a love relationship, in a life's work, in trying to learn a musical instrument, in the attempt to shape a better more generous self. Heartbreak is the beautifully helpless side of love and affection and is [an] essence and emblem of care... Heartbreak has its own way of inhabiting time and its own beautiful and trying patience in coming and going."
- The paradoxically powerful idea for me in that quote is being "beautifully helpless" – is God helpless in this way in the face of our rebellions? – in God's heartbreak at the mess we've made of God's creation, is there, as Paul suggests in the opening section of his letters to the Corinthian church, a 'foolish' and 'scandalous' forgiving patience that casts

out fear and anger? – the answer of this psalm is a resounding ‘YES’ - in a society so frantically driven by fear and anger, can we sense that patient forgiving love beneath all the panic and paranoia? – the answer of this psalm is a resounding ‘With God being my helper’

- Chances are that most of us are going to be reluctant to talk to an angry ‘Eye in the sky’ about how we are transgressing the laws that God has laid down to be obeyed without question – I don’t think you can scare and coerce people into a loving relationship – I don’t think that is God’s approach – I think we are patiently and persistently loved into the fullness of our redemption by God’s abundant mercy and steadfast affection that we see most clearly in the life and teachings of Jesus, the Christ

Finding this in God’s living Word, Jesus Christ

- Imagine, for a moment, the heartbreak of God at the crucifixion – human beings, filled with a fearful and angry certitude in their righteousness, put God to death – and God doesn’t hold it against them – God forgives – how utterly insane, how foolish and scandalous, is that?? – perhaps it is insane to humans so caught up in the web of our accumulated rebellions against God’s calling to be stewards of the whole of creation, but it makes perfect sense to souls mended by the forgiving love that flows from the heart of the God who the Spirit convinces us is revealed most powerfully in our nourishing relationship with Jesus Christ – with that kind of God, we can work out anything

Your Notes

Prayers for Help – as the institutions have supported and nourished us for generations, O Lord, struggle for survival, remind us that they were all built to provide space for the community with you and others that nourish our lives to flourish – so focus our attention on how we can work together with you to improvise and innovate new forms of that community where you can assure people afresh of your steadfast and trustworthy love – make those of our friends and families who are suffering the fear of illness, perhaps feeling isolated in that condition, newly aware of your love and healing – and help us be part of your presence with them (silence to consider this)

Prayers of Thanks – for the many ways you remind us, indeed, surprise us, with your rescuing presence – open our eyes to see the connections that nourish us in a smile, a touch, a laugh, a coin, a pair of socks (silence to consider this)

Prayers of Wow – nourish our wonder at the simple things that draw our attention to the invitations you generate for being in community and building community that breaks into the panic and despair of isolation with your word of welcome and acceptance (silence to consider this)

The framework and flow of thanks, help, and awe is taken from Anne Lamott’s wonderful little book on prayer, Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012).