

## ***Honest to God***

Psalm 86

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Georgetown Presbyterian Church

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Three men were talking the other day. They were discussing the proper position and attitude for prayer. One said, "You should be on your knees with your head bowed down in reverence to the Almighty."

The second man spoke up and said, "Remember that you were created in God's image. The position in which to pray is to stand up looking into the heavens into the face of God and talk to him as a child to his father."

The third man spoke up and said, "I know nothing about those positions, but the finest praying I ever did was upside down in a well."

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It's true, isn't it--there's something about personal troubles that makes our prayers more urgent. Yet the Christian church today is reluctant to talk about personal troubles. Do you ever wonder why that is? It seems to me that we're a little less than ingenuous if all we focus on are the things that bring us joy and happiness. Because you know and I both know that life is not always full of joy and happiness. Sometimes life is messy, and confusing, and painful. But you didn't really need me to tell you that, did you?

Still, it makes me wonder--why is the Christian church so reluctant to allow hardships and trials enter our conversations? Why is it that the Christian church, especially in modern times, has tended to emphasize the happy and the joyful, but we deny or ignore the pain and the suffering? On any given Sunday one wouldn't know by looking at you sitting in the pews that there was any trouble at all in your lives. For some reason, people put on a happy face when they walk into the church, even if everything in their lives cries out sadness and heartbreak. Why do you think that is so? Why is it that people have to pretend that everything is okay, when you know that under the surface their lives are a mess? Why aren't we allowed to wear our hearts on our sleeves when we come through the church doors? I think we ought to outlaw the word "fine" as a response to the question, "How are you doing?", because "fine" is used as a cover-up for our pain.

Let me give you a fer-instance. Just since last Sunday, I have learned of three church members who have been diagnosed with various forms of cancer, and one other who is awaiting results on testing. But you probably can't tell who those folks are, because for some reason people feel like they shouldn't burden us with their pain or their fears.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not in any way opposed to positive expressions of faith, or optimism grounded in our knowledge of God. I just wonder why modern-day Christians feel like we're not allowed to express our fears, our doubts, our numbness, even our anger.

There is found in the Book of Psalms a collection of psalms categorized as psalms of lament. As the name of the category suggests, these are psalms that reflect the pain and sorrow of the author. More than one-third of the Book of Psalms consists of psalms of lament. The laments may be written from the perspective of the individual, or from the perspective of the community of faith. The psalms of lament are characterized by the

frankness of their language, the bearing of the soul for all to hear. In the psalms of lament the speaker cries out to God, complaining to God that their situation is somehow unjust. It is often implied, if not directly stated, that God is to blame for the suffering of the psalmist or the community; at a minimum the ones praying the words of the psalm are imploring God to rescue them from their trials and tribulations.

There is a boldness in the faith found in the psalms of lament. For one thing, these psalms insist that the world must be seen as it really is, without artificially sugar-coating something that isn't so sweet. There is a stark realism in the psalms of lament, recognizing that life is messy, that life hurts sometimes, that the world does at times seem to be falling apart all around us. The psalms of lament are also bold expressions of faith in that they recognize that all experiences of disorder are a proper subject of conversation with God. We do not need to hide the pain and confusion from God, because God already knows about those things. Indeed, our faith is more authentic when we open up and share our feelings honestly with God.

Psalms of lament are honest-to-God prayers, calling life for what it is: messy, chaotic, confusing, disorienting.

Psalm 86 is a psalm of lament. As such, it provides us with a model of how we may pray to God, especially in the midst of turmoil or crisis or trouble in our lives. In this psalm before us this morning, we have modeled for us three things to aid us in praying through the dark times of our lives.

First, there is modeled for us a persistent pleading and direct address toward God. Note how many of the verbs have the second person singular as their subject: You.

You guard my life. You save your servant. You have mercy on me. You bring joy to your servant. You hear my prayer. You teach me your ways. You grant your strength to me. You give me a sign of your goodness...

Don't you see, the psalmist is engaging God directly. But the psalmist isn't speaking in the descriptive, as if he is telling God that God does indeed guard his life or saves his servant. The psalmist isn't speaking in the descriptive; he's speaking in the imperative. It is with urgency that the psalmist is telling God what he expects God to do. It is a persistent pleading that won't let up until the psalmist is assured of God's salvation.

Don't you remember when your children or grandchildren were but toddlers, they would come up to you and tug on you and cry out in that pitiful yet cute tone of voice, "Mama, Mama, Mama, Mama..." or "Dada, Dada, Dada, Dada..." incessantly, lifting up their arms and looking you in the eyes until finally you would bend down and pick them up? That's the kind of persistence you find in the honest-to-God prayers of the psalms of lament--relentless petitions crying out for the help and comfort of God, petitions that won't cease until you know God has responded.

Do you pray with that kind of persistence?

Jesus spoke of a widow who showed up at a judge's bench every time court was in session, seeking justice. She was unrelenting in her determination. Finally the judge gave in and granted her request. The point of that parable is not that we can wear God down, but that proper supplication is persistent and unrelenting, because it is a demonstration of a faith that won't give up until God has satisfied our needs.

Do you pray with that kind of persistence?

The second thing the 86<sup>th</sup> psalm models for us as a prayer of lament is its use of a sacred faith statement as an anchor point. This one isn't obvious at first. But take note that twice in the psalm we find references to God being abounding in love. You find it in the fifth verse: "You are forgiving and good, O Lord, abounding in love to all who call on you." And you find it again even more eloquently in the fifteenth verse: "But you, O Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness." These are not random

thoughts offered by the psalmist; rather, they are a recitation of one of the earliest self-revelations that God made to his people. In the 34<sup>th</sup> chapter of Exodus, God appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai, and as God's glory passed by Moses, God revealed himself with these words: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness..."<sup>1</sup> And so by reciting these words, the psalmist is falling back on what was for him an ancient creed of his faith as a resource to remind him of who is this God with whom he is pleading.

It's kind of like our propensity to recite the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm at a funeral. The words are familiar, and they tell of a God who is with us, even in the valley of the shadow of death.

When our own words fail us, we have the creeds and great verses of our faith tradition to fall back on. We need those anchor points to give us bearing when life becomes confusing. We need those moorings to keep us from being swept out into the chaos of life.

Finally, the psalm of lament models for us the basis by which we can plead before God so urgently and insistently. We can do so for two reasons. We can do so because it is our habit, because God is the only one to whom we turn, because our faith directs us to take our joys and our sorrows to God. And we can plead urgently, insistently, confidently because our confidence lies not in our own worthiness but in the character and compassion and love and power of God. "Among the gods there is none like you," declares the psalmist<sup>2</sup>, boldly proclaiming that only God is able. God is the only one for whom we can proclaim, "You are great and do marvelous things; you alone are God."<sup>3</sup>

We can plead urgently before God because God is God, and no one else can be God. There is only one whom we can call our shepherd, or whom we can describe as gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

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Ours is a resurrection faith, which means that out of despair and chaos and disorder and death, God has brought new life. Suffering is real, and ought not be ignored. Instead, we ought to join with the psalmist in affirming that it is out of the depths of suffering that new life is given by God. The suffering becomes part of the brickwork by which God builds our lives. Suffering is an opportunity for us to engage with God, to ask God the hard questions. And it is suffering that reminds us that we need a savior, and so our faith turns us toward God.

My friends in Christ, our faith is not one that says "Don't worry, be happy." Our faith looks at the world through the lens of the human struggle. It's not a faith that is blindly optimistic--ours is an optimism that is bound in the character and power of God. The struggle with suffering and pain is an important part of our faith that we are not to deny, for it is only in the context of our suffering and pain that the good news of God's love and mercy and power truly becomes good news.

Embrace God in the midst of the pain, and the sorrow, and the grief. Then--and only then--will the words "Nothing can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord"<sup>4</sup> become more than just words. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 34:6

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 86:8

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm 86:10  
<sup>4</sup> Romans 8:39