

THE TURN OF FAITH

Scripture Reading: Psalm 77

I'm going to break an unwritten rule of preaching this morning. The rule is that you never speak ill of someone the congregation knows personally. Throughout my career, I have followed this rule faithfully, but I find that I can hold my silence no longer. And I'm hoping you can sympathize because, like me, you have been cooped up for months on end with a very limited number of people. And there comes a time when too much time together is simply that – too much. Day after day after day of the same problems, issues, complaints, vanities, conversations and arguments have simply worn me down. This morning, I have to confess to you that I am sick to death of... ME.

Do you understand where I'm coming from? I mean, it's been great spending more time with my partner. We have been better than ever in keeping in touch with family and friends, even if only through Facetime and Zoom and whatever. Watching the way our church families with kids have interacted through this quarantine time has even made me envious, wondering how much closer my friendly would have been after creatively spending so much time together. But what I didn't anticipate was how this pandemic would make me spend all this time with and attention on ME. And, frankly, I've had enough. I'm sick of me. The bloom is off the rose.

Sam Lansky wrote in Time Magazine, *“At the dawn of the pandemic, as businesses shuttered and frontline workers braved inadequate conditions and the death toll began to tick frighteningly upward, I was home alone, nursing one selfish obsession: that I would use this time to get in really good shape. I am not proud of this—I would much rather write that I was raising money for communities disproportionately affected by this crisis or delivering meals to the immunocompromised—but it's the truth. The more I thought about it, the more the idea sharpened in my mind's eye: this persistent fantasy of how I would emerge anew once the lockdown lifted, athletic and radiant, the best I'd ever been.”*

You can imagine what the result of Sam's determination has been, probably because it echoes some of what we've all vowed and failed to improve in this strange time. And those vows have not just been about physical improvements but about moral and spiritual ones as well. Henri Nouwen reflects on those kinds of attempts:

“... there is a real temptation to want to look inside of ourselves and clean it all out, and become people with a pure heart, unstained intentions, and unconditional love. Such an attempt is doomed to failure and leads us to ever great despair...”

And that has been my greatest frustration with ME – despite all this time and attention I haven't gotten any better. Instead, I echo the whining of our Psalmist this morning:

I cry aloud to God

In the night my hand is stretched out

I think of God and I moan

I am so troubled that I cannot speak...

I, I, I, I, I...

That's the Psalmist, just as self-obsessed as you and I. Even when the Psalmist asks a series of faith questions:

“Will the Lord spurn forever?

Has God's steadfast love ceased”

Are God's promises at an end?

Has God forgotten how to be gracious?”

His questions are all rhetorical, all variations on, *“Hey, God - What about ME?!”*

My friend and writing partner Dave Stoddard has a great line for the self-obsessed: *“Well, enough about me. What do YOU think about ME?”*

What about ME, God?

And then comes verse 10 on which, according to scholar Walter Brueggemann, this whole Psalm hinges:

And I say, “It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed.”

Listen to that verse again, for it is truly audacious: *And I say, “It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed.”*

The Jerusalem Bible translates it this way: *“This,” I said then, “is what distresses me; that the the power of the Most High is no longer what it was.”*

The New English Bible puts it, *“Has his right hand, I said, lost its grasp? Does it hang powerless, the arm of the Most High?”*

You know what the Psalmist is saying because we've all said it in the dark night of the soul: in verse 10, the Psalmist has lost her faith. She no longer believes that God is powerful enough to benefit ME, to pay attention to MY needs, to solve MY problems.

This moment in our spiritual life can bring people to proclaim that they have no faith at all. You and I know those who have ended their faith journey or spiritual pilgrimage at this point on the path. You can see this as a loss of faith or, like the Psalmist, this can be the **turn** of faith as the Psalmist opens himself up to a new, deeper, richer, more mature faith.

The old faith, the superstitious one about privilege and exceptionalism and guarantees of MY health and MY wealth is no more. It's like when Copernicus discovered that the sun didn't revolve around the earth but, in fact, the opposite was true. Now the Psalmist is ready to embrace a Copernican revolution in faith.

I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord

I will remember YOUR wonders

I will meditate on YOUR work

YOUR way, O God, is holy

YOU are the God who works wonders

With YOUR strong arm you redeemed YOUR people.

Do you hear the change, the change from faith being all about I and ME to faith being about YOU and YOUR, or to put it in the old English, all about THOU?

A soldier approached the Teacher. *“I have mastered all the martial arts,”* he said. *“I have risen to the highest rank possible for a man of my training. Now I wish to learn about God. Can you help me?”*

The Teacher smiled and invited the man to sit at the table. *“Let us have a cup of tea,”* he said, *“before we talk further.”*

After the soldier sat, the Teacher began to pour tea into the man’s cup. He filled the cup and kept on pouring until the tea was running over the table onto the floor. The soldier watched dumbfounded until he could no longer be silent. *“Stop! It is full! The cup will hold not more more tea!”*

Placing the teapot back on the table, the Teacher addressed the soldier. *“You are so full of yourself that there is no room for God. It is not possible for you to learn until you empty yourself.”*

That Japanese story reminds us of the turn of faith, the turn from self-regard, to openness, to emptying yourself so that you might be filled with God.

Nouwen reminds us of the first and most important lesson of Christian faith: *“... we cannot save ourselves. Only Jesus can save us. That is why it is so important to remove your inner eye away from the complexities of your own broken heart toward the pure but broken heart of Jesus. Looking at him and his immense mercy will give you the ability to accept your own imperfections, to let yourself be cared for by the mercy and love of Jesus.”*

That’s the turn of faith, when we yield our sense of control and privilege for a deeper trust in the merciful presence and holy purposes of God.

I know a lot of people who weren’t simply sad at the news of Ruth Bader Ginsberg’s death yesterday, but received it like an alarm bell, like a claxon, an emergency siren. Blood pressures jumped up, adrenalin started pumping, anxiety levels skyrocketed, and suddenly it was Fight or Flight time,

This whole lonely, angry, divided, polarized nation is hurling insults at one another and drowning in self-pity and self-righteousness. There is a word for what afflicts us – narcissism. It’s all about ME and what I want, what I think, what I’m owed. There’s no science. There’s only my opinion. There’s no common good. There’s only what makes me comfortable. There’s no sacrifice. There is only acquisition for my personal benefit.

We can’t see beyond ourselves right now. We want to shout in anger or point a finger in accusation or hide away in utter discouragement.

Listen, there are plenty of things worth getting angry about right now and there is plenty of work for us to be doing. But the Psalmist is reminding us this morning that it isn’t all about us – there is a God who works wonders, a God who has been active in our history as people of faith, the God of the Exodus, the God of the Storm, the God of the waters whose love and power and mercy and

justice reach out to us in these angry times, reach out to us in our isolation and fear, reach out to us making possible what we ourselves cannot achieve.

That doesn't mean we ignore the urgent needs of the present. The turn of faith is not a turning inward in passive withdrawal. Nor is the turn of faith a turning against one another in shame and fury. It is a turning toward God in the midst of our world's aching need, looking for God's mercy, God's justice, God's works, and God's wonders.

Notice how the Psalm ends - with the faithful remembrance that *"You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron."* It's an abrupt ending. It doesn't circle back to solve the problems that occasioned the Psalmist's prayer. It provides no neat and easy answers. Instead, it offers us the assurance of God's faithfulness, urging us on to step out in trust into a new future made possible by God.

It takes us from the place of self-pity and despair that began this Psalm and delivers us onto the path of faith, leading to an uncertain future, a path illuminated by God's love and guided by God's justice.

If you're like me, I know you want to earn it, to plan it, to solve it for yourself. But this morning I invite you and I to give up our self-obsession and place our trust in God's mercy, God's love, God's faithfulness, God's justice, God's peace.

Just take it. Just accept it. All of it. No preconditions. No prerequisites. No plan or procedure. You don't have to lose twenty pounds first or pray before every meal or never miss a worship service or be perfect with your kids or nicer to your partner; you don't have to eat better or get more exercise or clean out the garage or the attic. Just... mercy. Just... grace. Just... love. And just because.

Amen.

Sermon preached by Reverend Steve Savides at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin
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