

Pleasing God, Not People...
and Other Reflections on Psalm 30 and Paul's Letter to the Galatians

Psalm 30 *As for me, I said in my prosperity, "I shall never be moved."
By your favor, O Lord, you had established me as a strong mountain;
you hid your face; I was dismayed.*

Galatians 1:10-12 *Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval?
Or am I trying to please people?
If I were pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.*

On Thursday morning I wrote in my journal: "I think I want to talk about everything this Sunday!" Throughout the week, there was this very rich dialogue going on between Psalm 30 and Paul's words to the Galatian community, and my day-to-day experiences. So I share with you some reflections on both readings.

The psalm is about the ups and downs of life, the weeping and the joy, when we feel strong like mountains and when everything falls apart, when we feel in harmony with others and when we feel misunderstood or unfairly treated. I think the psalmist knows there is no final victory over all his enemies, all the things that threaten his world. Yet in the midst of the flux that is the nature of life itself, the psalmist experiences God who saves and upholds him through these things.

This past couple of weeks have been full of difficult experiences of life's constantly changing nature. Three of our Covenant Members have been facing and continue to face serious physical difficulties. Beth Mahler. Hannah Herward. Rachel Wilson. We think also of Jeff Holdren, who is no longer able to worship with us because of the progression of MS. Our hearts go out to them. We pray and hope for good outcomes for all, yet also know that this is not always possible. Part of our discomfort with others' suffering is that it reminds us of our own mortality, that we have these bodies that eventually wear out and are susceptible to every kind of infection, injury, or malfunction. This will never change. There is never a point at which we will be immune from illness or death. We don't like to talk like this. Yet we must also embrace the difficult realities of life.

Tomorrow evening the Festival Center Board will meet to decide how to close down that mission after seven years of being and working in the College Hill neighborhood. Lack of funds and other factors have been leading us to this point for a year or more. It has not worked out as we had hoped, that the Festival Center would continue as a permanent part of that neighborhood and the lives of its residents. In the weeks ahead, as we do what is needed to close down, to thank the many people who have helped us, and to celebrate the life of the center, we will remember and experience many things. We will also remain open to new movements of God's spirit, new missions that may arise. This, too, is a profound experience that life takes its own course, sometimes in painful directions, in spite of our best efforts to make things go the way we want.

The psalmist is saying that circumstances of life are always changing for us. Sometimes there is weeping. Then there is joy. Sometimes things go well for us. Then everything falls apart. Sometimes we feel God's reality and presence clearly and firmly. Sometimes it is as though God's face is hidden, as the psalmist says. To think that somehow we will get to the point where everything will be fixed, nailed down, or trouble free is a powerful illusion to which we continue to cling. Yet, throughout the ups and downs, the heights and depths, the psalmist remains open to God, to God's sustaining and reviving power. There is a point of maturity in our faith when we begin to see our illusions and to let go of them. We stop expecting life to bend itself to our expectations and desires. We open up to all of life's experiences and begin to drop our attempts to create something fixed and permanent. We begin to understand that to live by faith means living fully all the experiences of our lives, being fully present to them.

Here is where what we call the inward journey is essential. It is our daily work of awareness of what we are experiencing, the heights or depths, the fears or the exhilarations. We realize, with the psalmist, that neither the heights nor the depths last. One moment we feel in the depths. Then we feel

strong as mountains. Then it changes again. The problem comes when we sink into either one, when we attach ourselves to these feelings and experiences that have the nature of change. The life of prayer, of the inward journey, enables us to go back to that quiet center where we open to God. This is the only explanation of why we are sometimes able to be in the midst of tremendously stressful circumstances and yet be inwardly at peace. There is that center of us where we know the secret of the psalmist: Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes in the morning. We also know that joy may linger for a while, but weeping may well return. Yet in and through it all, we learn through our faithful inward journey work how to have peaceful hearts and minds. We continue with our commitments, to working with what we feel God has called us to. And yet we do so with spirits that are soft and open, not rigid and pushing.

Then there is Paul, writing to the Galatian community. They are falling for distortions of the gospel presented them by some who want to make the life of faith into legalism, not the freedom of God's gift of love. They are "quickly deserting" Paul, who called them to the grace of Christ (v. 1). Paul is trying to re-center them on the gospel of God's grace in Christ, the pure gospel, as he says. It is not something he learned from other teachers. It is not his own version of the good news from God. It is what he learned from his own experience of the risen Christ, an experience that turned him from a persecutor of Jesus' community into an apostle to the Gentile world. The truth of this gospel of God's grace known in Christ is shown in the changes in Paul's life. It is not about head knowledge or doctrines learned by rote. It is about what the experience of God's unconditional love can mean in the freedom we experience and the way our lives can benefit the world.

Paul is not trying to get the Galatians to like him. It is not about his own ego. The Christians at Galatia are certainly free to go in other directions, as apparently was happening. But Paul wants to remind them as forcefully as he can that the good news about Jesus is that we are saved, made whole, given new life--however you want to put it--not by law but by grace, not by making ourselves worthy or good or meeting certain requirements, but by receiving the free gift of God's love.

Paul writes: "Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ." Paul is not trying to please people. He is trying to articulate the gospel and live out his own call from God as faithfully as he can. He does not ask permission to do this. He does not feel that he has to get the approval of the "mother church" in Jerusalem. He has a clear understanding of what God's love is about, and what it can mean to a person's life to become an authentic follower of the living Christ, and he is giving his life to that. Paul must have felt great pain about the Galatian community, but he is going to continue doing what he feels called by God to do.

Paul's situation is different from the psalmist's. And yet in some ways it is the same. Paul is experiencing the pain of others' rejection of his best efforts to share with them the gospel as honestly and lovingly as he knows how to do it. Whereas the psalmist is talking about various experiences of struggle and difficulty, Paul is writing out of a situation involving other people and our relationships to them. Paul is talking about the freedom that comes when we experience the powerful truth of God's unconditional love for us and begin to see the particular way God is calling and empowering us to live our lives for the sake of the world. Others will understand or misunderstand. They will agree or disagree. They will like us or not. They will give their approval and support, or they will give us a hard time. None of that matters, Paul is saying. He, and all of us, are meant to live our lives to please God, not other people. Paul does not say this in a cynical or bitter way. The simple truth is that if we live our lives always with an eye to how others feel about us, then we will never get down to living out of who we are at the core of our being--persons created, gifted, and called by God.

This, too, brings us back to the importance of our inward journey. It is there in our daily reflection and growth in self-understanding that we see where we are binding ourselves to others' expectations, and where we need to claim the freedom to be the unique persons God calls us to be and to do the things God particularly calls us to do. It is through our faithful inward journey work that we grow less dependent on the affection, approval, or affirmation of others, and freer to live our lives by the inward light of God's love and call. In the end, only as we are growing in such freedom can we truly love others. For then our love is not dependent on how they respond to us. We can love those who like us and those who don't. We can love those who agree with us and those who don't, those who understand us and those who don't. It is the freedom of living our lives on the basis of God's love and call--to please God--and not to please others.

So, maybe I have offered something important to think about and work with. The peace that we can find even in the midst of the constant flux and change of life, as we learn how not to attach ourselves to or sink into either the depths or the heights. And the peace, joy, and love that comes when we give more attention to pleasing God than to pleasing other people, when we do not attach ourselves to the need for others' approval or agreement. Both of these things help us grow in our capacity to love with the love that comes from God.