

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for August 24, 2008 in the Old Broad Street Church
Lessons: Psalm 13 and Matthew 8:1-4; 15:29-31; 27:45,46

ANSWER ME!

Suppose you receive a letter from a friend with whom you have been out of touch, and that letter begins, “How long, _____ (your name)? Will you forget me forever?” How would you react? Would you set the letter aside to answer it, perhaps, some day when you had time to spare? Suppose a parent received such a letter from an estranged daughter or son. What would the opening anger, hurt, and resentment mean if the parent indeed still loved the grown child? Would these pained questions not offer an opportunity for love to express itself anew?

In Psalm 13, which matters more, the psalmist’s situation of fear and distress or relationship with the LORD God? My question poses a false choice, because the two are inseparable, which is my point. We need to see that the psalm assumes a relationship of trust that is being strained by God’s silence as the situation worsens.

A young boy was being bullied at school. At first, his mother downplayed the problem, hoping to encourage him to be tough and stand up for himself. When she saw his anger turning toward her, she moved closer to him emotionally, letting herself feel his shame at being made to appear weak in front of his classmates. As he turned to leave the house for school, she asked what she could do to help. Her son answered, “It’s okay, Mom, I can handle it. I just needed to know you cared.”

The psalmist cannot handle the situation alone, but to understand Psalm 13 and sense where it fits into our own lives, we need to feel, not only the psalmist’s distress at the present danger, but her even greater distress at God’s absence. As I said last Sunday, the author of the psalm was almost surely a man, but by “the psalmist” I mean the person voicing this outcry as a prayer. So, if you are making this psalm your own, letting it speak for you in your distress and your need for God’s present help, then the psalmist becomes “he” if you are a man, “she” if you are a woman. I’m talking about more than our long-overdue awareness that God’s people come in both genders; I’m trying to help us sense the way these psalms invite us to make them our own, to let them speak for us and with us when we need help going to God, talking to our deepest selves, and dealing with life. They can give voice to what we think and feel.

As Christians, we are taught to be reverent and defer almost stoically to God's will, but we have confused God's will with the distressing events themselves, as though whatever happens to us is automatically to be regarded as an expression God's will and purpose for our lives. That's false, and Jesus assures us it is false.¹ For the Stoic, external events cannot really touch or affect the person, the inner "soul." The Stoics viewed relationships as externals, so that even the suffering or death of a loved one – a parent, spouse, or child – should not harm or unduly influence the "soul" of the wise person. We should not let ourselves be touched deeply by others or affected by our own sufferings or deprivations. In this way, wisdom is divorced from empathy, lest the wise be vulnerable and weak. Nothing could be further from the truth of God's love. For God, there is no wisdom or truth that denies empathy with the suffering and shamed. God cares, and God has committed to caring for the covenant people. Does such commitment not make even God vulnerable? Yes, it does, and God does not shy from that vulnerability. Paul reminds us that "the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God stronger than human strength."²

What does the leper want from Jesus that makes him dare to challenge the teacher, the rabbi, who stands so far above him on the social scale? The crowd must gasp and clutch its breath, hearing him shout at Jesus that way. "Sir, if you choose, you can make me clean." What impudence! How dare that sinful wretch speak that way to a man of God? Why should the teacher care about a man God has plainly cursed and discarded? He should be grateful when decent people deign to toss coins to him.

Notice that the leper's challenge to Jesus comes directly after the Sermon on the Mount. "Keep seeking," Jesus encourages us, "and you will find." "Keep knocking, and the door will be opened to you." Love perfectly as God loves perfectly, by being kind even to your enemies. Oh, God loves? That's news to this leper. He couldn't prove it by his experience of life that God loves or even cares. Does his life matter to God? There doesn't seem to be much evidence that it does. *What about me, Teacher? Do I count, or are you here just for the already favored? Answer me! Don't just walk on by. Look at me. I'm a person, a human being wasted away by this disease, this curse from God, as I'm told. What did I do to be so cursed? If you have the will, if you care, you can heal me. Well, do you?*

I suggest to you there is a straight line from this leper's challenge to Jesus' own cry to his Father from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Neither is a question that wants an answer, if answer means a mere explanation. There is no explanation, no satisfactory reason why.

Stop this, the religionist objects. God is sovereign, and God's will must be accepted whether it makes sense to us or not. Stop questioning, and be thankful for what you have. Is that the way it is? Is that what we teach our children? God is bigger and stronger than

anybody, and so is perfectly free and right to do anything to anyone? Are we telling our children that the biggest bully of all is God, and so all lesser bullies are justified? Might makes right, and God is the mightiest and right-est of all?

For centuries, we Christians have been saying that Jesus takes our place on the cross, but we haven't listened very well to ourselves. Yes, indeed, he takes our place, but not impassively as a stand-in, a ringer who can't really be hurt because he isn't really one of us. Oh no. He really is one of us, and when he challenges God for abandoning him, his outcry rips the heavens.

What happens when the father or mother opens the letter and reads, "How long? Will you forget me forever?" *Will I never matter to you again?*

Jesus is united with every man, woman, and child who cries out to God from the distress or despair of abandonment. Cries out in anger, hurt, resentment, shame. He is every God-forsaken person in this world.

For the great classical philosophers Plato and Aristotle, justice was proportionate, not equal or meant to be equal: proportionate to a person's station in life³ Compassion for a slave being treated as a slave was wasted feeling and even a sin. For these philosophers, the lesser person should always love the greater more than the greater loves his inferior. The wife should love her husband more than he loves her. The son should love his father more, the slave his master. For them, God (being the greatest) should not and does not love anyone, for all look up to God but God to none. If we think that we are free in our democracy from this scorn for empathy with the supposedly inferior person, we need to think again, because we are not free of it. Benevolence we admire because it shows the greatness of the great. Jesus might have tossed the leper a coin or even healed him in passing, if he felt so inclined to show the crowds he was magnanimous. But let himself be challenged? That's shameful.

In the Bible and especially in Jesus, God takes exactly the opposite stance. For God, the weakness of empathy is the strength we need most, and compassion is the perfect strength. Psalm 13 invites us to challenge God, to call for justice and compassion, to expect God to care and be present with help. The relationship matters as much as the help itself, and that's what we need to learn. A parent gets tired of being the automatic dispenser of money, labor, or other help on demand. Well, God wants us to care, too. When I cry out to God, "Do I matter to you?" the same question just might come back to me: "Yes, more than you know, but do I matter to you?" And if I say, "Yes," however tentatively, then I begin a new stage in my journey of faith. What I discover as I go forward is that the more I care about God as Person, as distinct from my own desires and needs, as the One who loves me and this

world, the more I will care about life and not just my goals, and the more I will care about other people and not just their usefulness to me or their ways of irritating me.

The church matures in faith as it stops defending its formulated answers against people's doubts and starts listening to their questions and challenges to our "truth." If I truly start walking Jesus' way, I may find myself on a dusty road where an outcast shouts a belligerent challenge. A young self-styled atheist asks scornfully what good religion is when all it does is promote bigotry and fuel wars. A grief-torn woman says she's made a deal with God: "I'll leave Him alone if He'll leave me alone." And from somewhere far off but also somehow inside me comes a cry, "My God, my God, why?" I have no answer. And slowly I realize it's not the answer I need but the question. Amen.

Notes:

1. Jesus both insists upon and demonstrates God's opposition to the conditions of human life. He rejects facile identifications of God's will with people's experiences and sufferings. For him, the kingdom of God comes in opposition to the prevailing conditions of life, so that the poor and lowly are lifted up and the high and mighty cast down.
2. See I Corinthians 1:18-25.
3. Bertrand Russell explains this distinction helpfully (as well as the Stoic rejection of compassion) in his book, *A History of Western Philosophy*, "Book One: Ancient Philosophy."