

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
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Sermon for September 21, 2008
Lessons: Psalm 1 and Luke 12:22-34

WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME?

If we were to take Psalm 1 as the Bible's standard for human life, many troubling questions would be denied thoughtful and compassionate consideration. We would close our ears to the cries of protest from people whose lives were not measuring up to the standard. Listen to what the psalm says about the righteous, meaning people who delight in God's instruction and pay no heed to scoffers:

They are like trees planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

Is that the norm, the rule, the standard we should expect in life? So, if those who put their trust in God and delight in God's ways find themselves not prospering but suffering defeat and disappointment, who is at fault, God or the person who has trusted God?

This question, "Who is at fault?" comes upon us with a force I described last Sunday as the undertow of faith in God's promises. The tide flows in, and you can ride a wave, but then the ocean pulls back. Once in a while, when I was a boy, I would ride a strong wave and get dumped, then get knocked down again by the next wave before I could scramble back to my feet. The waves were coming fast and hitting hard, but it was having to brace myself against the undertow that kept me from getting ready for the next wave. That's the ocean, and sometimes it's life, too.

The psalm says the righteous prosper in all they do. Really? Is that a deep, sometimes hidden truth we must work to discover in life, or can we take it at face value as a simple, authoritative standard? If it were a standard, then we could distinguish the righteous from the sinners by observing who prospers and who suffers defeat. Such a convenient belief. The wealthy must deserve their riches and the poor their poverty. The strong and healthy must be the right people. Even the pretty folks must enjoy God's good pleasure, and the well-spoken exhibit divine endowment.

The obvious, often blatant, contradictions to this false standard of *prosperity-equals-blessed-by-God* which further equals *deserving-of-God's-favor* leave people with two questions, usually favoring one over the other: *What's wrong with God?* or, *What's wrong with me?* Is God asleep at the switch, or am I substandard? The results of judging by this false standard are not good. When I am doing well, am I not tempted to arrogance? When my hopes come crashing down around me or just bog down in the mire of routine and duty, am I not put to shame?

Further, how do we look upon other people? Do we not use this *prosperity-equals-virtue* yardstick to regard the poor, the sick, or the disabled as people of lesser worth? We find ourselves looking at life through the lens of *virtue rewarded* and substandard performance punished with failures and sufferings people supposedly bring upon themselves.

- He got laid off. *Well, maybe next time he'll work harder. Or retrain and learn something more useful.*
- The bruises she's trying to cover come from a beating. *Well, maybe she'll work a little harder at understanding the pressures he's under and be a better Christian wife.*
- He's not learning to read as the other children are, and he's starting to misbehave in class. *Well, he'll just have to learn to settle for what God gave him, and coddling him won't help. He'll have to be taught to submit to authority, work harder, and settle down.*
- That's the third time she's been passed over for a promotion, despite all the good work she does for the company. *Well, and I suppose she's whining about discrimination because she's a woman? No, the promotion went to a newer employee who is also a woman – a young, thin, pretty one. Well, you use what God gives you, right?*
- *Those people should be grateful for the work they get and the pay they're offered. They'll probably just work long enough to qualify for unemployment, anyway.*

Whether we agree intellectually or not, we have been conditioned to think and “feel” that people get what they deserve in life and, therefore, deserve what they get. Even if we have reconditioned ourselves with faith to believe Christ came to redeem us from what we deserve, we still feel the triggering of shame when life goes wrong for us, and so we find ourselves asking, “What's wrong with me?”

I have spoken with you many times about the more famous question, *What's wrong with God?* or, *Where are God's justice and compassion in this world of injustice and suffering?* The psalmists do not ask such questions philosophically but put them directly to

God in whose love and faithfulness they have put their trust. *Where are you, my God, and why are you not helping me?* The undertow comes, however, in the question, *What's wrong with me?* How have I failed? What character flaw or sin has brought me to this state of disappointment and grief? Am I less of a person than I should be? Is God disappointed in me or even disgusted with me?

Let me suggest a different way of reading Psalm 1 and the promise of God's blessing upon the lives of people who put their faith in God and seek to follow God's way in the situations and choices of their lives. The psalm offers us, not a standard by which to judge ourselves and others, but an affirmation of faith and hope in the midst of struggle. Even though those who care about God may not prosper in the way the self-serving do, they will flourish in deeper, better, truer ways. So, right off the bat, we may dismiss the *get-with-Jesus-to-get-rich* nonsense as just that – nonsense designed to fool the greedy and gullible. Was Jesus rich? Did he love money? No, he did not even much value money, and he warned against the spirit-numbing power of wealth. Neither did he promise freedom from disease or grief in this world, even though he clearly set God's will in opposition to our sufferings and even, ultimately, our death. So, self-serving religion we need not consider further.

Neither will I accept the routine, "It's all for the best," answer that dismisses my questions by telling me God sees the bigger picture and so knows better than I what is for the best, even when hurts me. There is truth in that answer, but it wrongly attributes everything that happens to us to the will and plan of God. Jesus opposed that view of God's pulling all the strings so we would walk through life with no real choices and no sufferings or defeats of real significance. Jesus showed us God is compassionate and hurts with those life is hurting. God suffers our losses and shares our disappointments. Jesus' message is, "God is with you in this," not, "Don't worry, God has it all worked out in advance, and however much it hurts you now, it's all for the best." No, God works with us to heal and redeem the evils we suffer in this world. Jesus rejects the notion that God sends the evils upon us in some secret mission for our ultimate benefit.

For people who seek God, the question is transformed. No longer are we left asking only, "Why did this happen to me?" but we can work through that anguished question to a new one: "How will God lead me through this trouble, sharing my hurt, to a better place as a truer person?" Sometimes, as we know, that better place is not reached in this world. That's tragic, and God does not dismiss the tragedy or abandon us to it. "In the world, you have trouble," says Christ, "but, take heart, I have overcome the world." What we must not do, for our own sake and for the validity of the gospel, is turn any assurance into a simple, standardized answer to human sorrow, disappointment, and grief. Jesus gave himself for a world of people prospering in the wrong ways or not flourishing at all. If we will not let ourselves be moved by people's griefs, if we will not sit with them in silence when we have

no answers, if we will not share their sorrows, then we have no gospel for them. God's answer is compassion, which enters and shares another person's suffering, and God gives no answer that exists outside compassion. Redemptive love is God's way of being with us and for us in this world.

Sometimes, "What's wrong with me?" can be a helpful and creative question, if we don't let it crush us down. If it comes to mean, "What can I learn from this situation by dealing with it in faith and seeking God's redirection?" then by God's grace I can find help to heal and grow. But in that case, "What's wrong with me?" is not self-condemnation or shame's self-pity or bitterness but, rather, a question shared with God in hope for a better self with a better future.

Your heavenly Father knows what you need, Jesus assures us. Seek first the way of God's love and compassion, and what else you need will be added to you. Amen.