

19th Sunday after Pentecost (Year B)

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*Psalm 26*

*Vindicate me, O Lord,  
for I have walked in my integrity,  
and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering.  
Prove me, O Lord, and try me;  
test my heart and mind.  
For your steadfast love is before my eyes,  
and I walk in faithfulness to you.*

*I do not sit with the worthless,  
nor do I consort with hypocrites;  
I hate the company of evildoers,  
and will not sit with the wicked.*

*I wash my hands in innocence,  
and go around your altar, O Lord,  
singing aloud a song of thanksgiving,  
and telling all your wondrous deeds.*

*O Lord, I love the house in which you dwell,  
and the place where your glory abides.  
Do not sweep me away with sinners,  
nor my life with the bloodthirsty,  
those in whose hands are evil devices,  
and whose right hands are full of bribes.*

*But as for me, I walk in my integrity;  
redeem me, and be gracious to me.  
My foot stands on level ground;  
in the great congregation I will bless the Lord.*

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This is a troublesome psalm. Perhaps, Kathleen Bostrom puts it best when she says that the writer of this psalm sounds like a person who is too good to be true.<sup>1</sup> This person apparently has nothing but steadfast integrity, unwavering trust, and only walks in perfect faithfulness day after day. He is blameless, unblemished, his feet stand on level ground, and he washes his hands in innocence. Undaunted, he challenges God to test his heart and mind to prove that he doesn't just talk the talk but also walks the walk.

Now I don't know about you, but the days that I feel confident enough to echo such unabashed claims of righteousness are few and far between. In fact, my gut instinct when I hear someone speak with

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<sup>1</sup> Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4, p. 128.

such extreme claims of righteousness is to give them a wide berth because the fall from such a high pedestal can leave much damage in its wake.

Let's face it, this psalm seems to be the image of a (self)righteous jerk giving an acceptance speech for the "disciple-of-the-year" award ceremony. Why, then, should this psalm deserve our attention on this day? Why should we even give it the time of day?

Well, I feel as though sometimes there is merit to holding ourselves to a standard even if it seems unrealistic at the moment. When you think about it, many of us do just that whenever we say the pledge of allegiance. In that pledge, we uphold the republic that has "liberty and justice for all." I would hope that all of us realize that we do not live in a country that truly has liberty and justice for all; we still have plenty of work to do before that statement becomes fully true. However, this truth does not mean that we strike that phrase from the pledge. Instead, we continue to proclaim liberty and justice for all not because it is true but because we are citizens of a country that continually reminds itself of its desire to head in that direction. Simply put, the declaration of "liberty and justice for all" does not describe who we are but describes *who we feel called to be*.

Psalm 26, I believe, is similar in its intention. I prayed this prayer myself this week and, I'll admit, it was tough. I prayed this prayer as my own and I felt in that moment like God was rolling on the floor laughing as my nose got longer, and longer, and longer.

And, yet, the more I meditated on this passage, the more I found my heart warmed by it. I embraced this psalm not because it was 100% true in my case but that I *wanted* it to be 100% true in my case.

Have I *completely* trusted in the Lord without wavering (as verse 1 claims)? Not exactly, but I really want to!

Have I *always* walked in faithfulness with God (as verse 3 claims)? Nope, but I really want to!

Have I *constantly* sung songs of thanksgiving and proclaimed God's wondrous deeds (as verse 7 claims)? I wouldn't use the word "constantly" but I certainly try and hope to do better moving forward!

When we pray this prayer, I don't think God is laughing at if lies are spewing forth from our mouths. Rather, when someone prays this prayer, I think God smiles because we are, at the very least, demonstrating a *desire* to be better followers.

The poet Thomas Merton once wrote of his struggles to be faithful to God with the following words: "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you."<sup>2</sup>

In that light, when engaging with a passage like a psalm, an exercise that I often find helpful is to rewrite the psalm in my own words. Therefore, a few days ago, I prayed to God using a mixture of Psalm 26 with my own feelings. Currently, my rendition of Psalm 26 looks something like this...

*Judge me, O Lord, not for who I am but who I wish to be,*

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999), 79.

*for I haven't always walked with integrity but I'm trying,  
I try to trust in you constantly but that isn't always easy.  
Prove me, O Lord, and try me; test my heart and mind  
because if you don't, I'm never going to grow.*

*I try to surround myself with people who, like me, are trying their best.  
I stand in line with the hypocrites, and the evildoers, and the wicked,  
as we all wait to be fed at your Table.  
Wash me that I might be innocent in your eyes,  
bring me to your Table, O Lord,  
put a song upon my lips to thank you,  
put a story within my heart to know you.*

*O Lord, I love the congregation in which you dwell,  
it is where you are made known, where your glory abides.  
Do not sweep me away from your life-giving stream,  
but plant me firmly upon your foundation,  
for that is where I'll thrive.*

*Lead me into integrity, redeem me into mercy,  
and be gracious to me that I might be gracious to others.  
With your help, my feet will stand on level ground;  
and your name I'll bless for the rest of my days.*

Currently, that's what Psalm 26 sounds like from the lips of Stephen Fearing. But whether you wish to pray Psalm 26 with the same confidence as the original author or with a little more reserved optimism like me, one thing to note is that Psalm 26 reminds us of the importance of keeping our eyes on the prize.

Psalm 26 reminds us that we, as the global church, are in the business of constant self-reflection and continual improvement. Together, we stand with the author of Psalm 26 and seek to walk with one another with integrity. Together, we grow with one another into disciples who come closer and closer to that goal of trusting in the Lord without wavering. Together, with our sisters and brothers across the globe, we proclaim that the steadfast love of the Lord is before our eyes and we have a duty sing songs of thanksgiving and to bless God's name in the congregation and beyond.

We bless the name of the Lord with the confidence of Psalm 26 not because we consider ourselves saints without blame or blemish, but because we consider ourselves saints born and blessed by the God who calls us beloved.

As we gather at this Table, as we do every month, with our sisters and brothers of all races, ethnicities, and creeds, we are reminded that together we stand before God and seek the blessing of God that we might be a blessing to others.

May it be so in our worship. May it be so in our lives. So be it.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.