

The Worship of God: The Healing of Persons

Text: Psalm 73:16-17
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Spring Lake, Michigan

June 19, 1988

Transcription of the spoken sermon

But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; there I saw clearly... Psalm 73:16-17

We all love a good fairy tale, children and adults, as well. Perhaps that is because fairy tales are true. The story comes out right: the good prosper, the wicked are wasted. Maybe something in the depths of our being responds to that because something in us knows that is the way it ought to be, should be - will be.

But, the fairy tale is true only if one takes the long-range view; only if God is God, Sovereign, working God's eternal purposes out, purposes of love and grace and salvation, bringing about finally a Kingdom in which dwells righteousness and peace - Shalom.

In the short range, the fairy tale is just that - a fairy tale, meaning a fantasy world quite out of sync with the real world. In the short range, things do not work out right - everyone does not live happily ever after. In the short range, one cannot find the working out of justice, fairness and equity. And if one's peace of mind and happiness and wellbeing are dependent upon life being fair and all things working out in an equitable fashion, one will have slight chance of arriving at inward peace and joy and rest of soul.

Life is not fair.

There is no justice within the span of a person's existence. No amount of research on actual, concrete, human stories will demonstrate that things work out right according to our human standards of what is fair and just. And that is a cause of much human suffering and anguish. It leads to one of the most serious and debilitating diseases of the human spirit - cynicism, bitterness, caused by envy and self-pity.

A cynical and bitter spirit smoldering with jealousy and self-pity has a corrosive effect on the human spirit; it is to have an acid eating away at one's soul; it is a

source of constant inward pain which is often assuaged by growing callouses on the soul, hardening oneself against feelings -feelings of joy and sorrow, of depression and exaltation.

Cynicism is the sneering attitude that denies the sincerity or goodness of human motives. It is the tendency to criticize and find fault. It flows from one generally embittered with life, disillusioned with the way things have turned out. Unless it is checked, such bitterness will become a permanent hardness of heart resistant to trust, to joy, to spontaneity in any form. It is a kind of spiritual deadness.

There is perhaps no more vivid portrayal of human experience struggling with cynical loss of faith and embitterment of spirit than Psalm 73. The Psalmist sets the record straight at the beginning.

Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.

That is both his conclusion and his premise. He can begin that way because he has passed through the fires of doubt and struggle and has come to affirm his trust in God, renewed only after great and painful wrestling with life experience. Brueggemann comments:

Verse 1 sets the premise for the Psalm, which is also its conclusion. But it is a different statement when it is conclusion than when it is premise. When it is premise, it may be taken as pre-hurt, pre-doubt, pre-anguish. It is then a buoyant statement of naiveté. But as a conclusion, the affirmation is on the other side of hurt, doubt and anguish. While the words may be the same, they now bear different freight. Now the unuttered words of resentment have been uttered. Now the unthinkable thoughts of hostility have been thought. ... Psalm 73 is an assault on any naive faith. It arrives tortuously at a second, knowing naiveté. (*The Message of the Psalms*, p. 116)

Having stated his premise, which is also his conclusion, the Psalmist goes on candidly to confess that he almost went over the brink, losing his grip on this fundamental conviction of faith. He writes:

My feet had almost slipped, my foothold had all but given way.

He then goes on to detail his bitter experience of doubt, his dark night of the soul as he questioned the moral structure of life and the knowledge and care of God. He speaks vividly, in graphic terms of how everything appeared to him during his time of intense struggle.

We must recognize immediately that in the midst of his personal torment his vision is blurred and his judgment warped. He gives us a very distorted view of things. According to him, the careless, the godless prosper, experience no pain,

no suffering, are strangers to trouble and trial. They grow wealthy, enjoy good health. They are proud, violent and full of scorn.

Is the picture overdrawn? Probably.

The world is not really divided into two camps, one a camp of white hats, the other a camp of black hats. To divide the world into the righteous and the wicked is a bit too simple, too neat. Certainly it is too simplistic for a congregation that prints on its bulletin week after week the statement of Hans Küng:

The front between the world and God's rule, between good and evil, runs right through the church, right through the heart of the individual.

Evil is much more subtle and entwines itself in the lives of us all.

This is not to say that there is no difference in people. Certainly there are those whose lives reflect a commitment to truth, righteousness, justice. There are those, as well, who seek their own advantage at whatever human cost to another and with total disregard for what is right and true.

Nonetheless, especially in the Church we need to resist the too simple division of persons into categories of righteous and wicked. But for the purpose of the Psalmist's story, it is not so important whether reality reflected what he perceived or not. The fact is this is the way he felt. This is how it looked to him.

We are indebted to this singer of Israel for revealing his soul to us. He was deeply hurting. He was angry at the world. He was angry at God. We have been there, too. And it is helpful to know that this kind of experience is not foreign to God's people.

The Old Testament is especially healthy in this regard. They stormed heaven with their wounded spirits and called the Almighty to account. There was no pious masking of their true feelings. The Psalmist is not the only Old Testament figure that stormed the citadel of Heaven crying out to God, *"How come?"*

I wonder what it was that was really rankling the Psalmist. Had he worked hard, done his best, dealt honestly and lived with integrity, only to have the bottom fall out of the economy and watch his life's work dribble away? Or had he risked everything to help a friend, only to have the friend turn on him? Was he disappointed in love? Did his children prove ungrateful? Had he just learned of a terminal disease which would soon cut him off?

The particulars are unimportant. Life has more than enough trouble and heartache to go around and the stuff of which the Psalmist's pain was made is almost without limit because we can set it down as a fundamental truth of human experience – Life is not fair.

Having admitted that, I want to make a point of application right here; granted, life is not fair, but

Pain perverts perspective.

If we could learn that well, it would save us much angry bitterness. As we said above, the Psalmist's view of things was warped, distorted, but this is what he was feeling. Happy the person who before the crisis promises himself he will make no world-encompassing generalizations in the midst of his anguish, because, again,

Pain perverts perspective.

Can we understand? Certainly. Have we been there? Most of us, at some time. But, it can be helpful to recognize ahead of time that how we feel and how things appear when we are hurting is not a true reflection of reality.

Pain perverts perspective.

When people are in crisis it does not help to try to correct their vision. It does little good to assure them that "This, too, will pass." When someone is pouring out their grief and anguish, just let it come; absorb it; feel it with them. That is not the time for a brilliant discourse or "a true perspective on Reality."

However, we can help ourselves be prepared for crisis times if we come to realize that

Pain perverts perspective.

The Psalmist has already given us his strong affirmation of faith and so obviously something happened to turn him around. He tells us in verse 16. He had been quite overcome with his completely negative perception of life. He says,

I set myself to think this out but found it too hard for me, until I went into God's sacred courts; there I saw clearly what their end would be.

The Psalmist learned the secret of the sanctuary. There, in the presence of God, in the posture of worship, he gained a new perspective. He found that

Worship is healing.

To make that statement calls for immediate clarification. I am not suggesting that the primary purpose or focus of our worship is our personal healing. We worship God. We celebrate the grace of God in response to God's revealing of an eternal saving purpose, a plan for the establishing of a Kingdom in which dwells righteousness and justice and peace.

But with that being granted, it is also important to understand the reflexive effect of our worship - to see how the action of worship has a healing effect on the one who worships.

The Psalmist says, “ Life was too painful for me; I tried to think it through and I could not. Then I went into the sanctuary -then I understood.”

In fairness to the text, I should let the whole statement be heard:

... Then I saw clearly what their end would be.

One could hear this as a rather mean satisfaction that “the wicked” will get theirs and maybe there is some of that operating here. It is a rare person that takes no satisfaction in the fall of another, particularly if one has been infected with the disease of bitterness and has wallowed in self-pity.

But even if that is true, there is the discovery here of a fundamental truth about God and human destiny which is the bedrock of biblical faith. The perspective of the sanctuary enabled the Psalmist to take the long view and to see that, although there is no justice in the short run, there is certainly a coming round of all things in the long run. Within the stream of history there is no possibility of seeing things whole. It is only in the posture of worship, in the presence of God that one is able to trust the process, trust the good and gracious and sovereign Lord of History to effect the promised Kingdom and bring Shalom.

But, beyond the new insight, beyond a renewed vision of God's eternal purpose, the Psalmist found a Presence. The Presence of God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Moses and the Exodus, the God of Covenant, the God of grace and steadfast love, the faithful God. In the sanctuary, in worship, the Psalmist experienced communion with God.

It is in the gaining of new insight and the experience of communion with God that healing happens!

Look at the Psalmist's expression of where he was before he worshipped:

*My heart was embittered.
I felt pangs of envy,
I would not understand, so brutish was I.
I was a mere beast in thy sight, O God.*

Now there was insight - not only on human experience in time and space, but also self-awareness, self-knowledge, understanding of the paralysis of spirit caused by his envy, cynicism and bitterness.

The world did not change. Circumstances did not change. The one who worshipped was changed.

I went into the sanctuary, there I saw clearly.

Thus we have a vivid statement of intense spiritual anguish and suffering and its cure – going to church! Perhaps that sounds naive. But it is, of course, more than going to church. It is the experience of worship. The effect of worship on the worshipper is the healing of the person.

Do we approach the worship of God with such high expectation? Do we recognize how crucial is the worship of God for the health of our being?

What a strange situation is Sunday morning! Karl Barth describes it vividly in one of his early essays - the building, the appointments, the songs, the prayers, the preaching - all of them “saying” more than they say; all of them pointing beyond themselves to another; all of them crying out, “God is here!”

And we come, Barth says, only half conscious of why - some out of habit, some out of need or hope - some believing, some not - some open and sensitive, some hardened by much hard experience. But, we come. And consciously or unconsciously we come with the burning question, “Is it true?” “Is God God?” “Is it true?”

Is there reason to hope?
Is there life in the end?
Will grace and truth triumph?
Will there break a dawn which shall know no setting sun?

That's why we come.

And all we do here is in order to lift our lives into the presence of the One Whose grace will touch us and Whose light will give us light and hope and heal us.

Come, then. Come prayerfully. Come with heart prepared, open, ready to be encountered. Come and worship, *for worship puts us in touch with God.*

The wrenching questions are not answered, but there is a Presence.

*Yet I am always with thee;
Thou holdest my right hand;
Thou dost guide me by thy counsel
and afterwards will receive me with glory.
Whom have I in heaven but thee?
And having thee, I desire nothing else on earth.*

And then he makes this very beautiful expression of absolute trust.

*My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and
my portion for ever.*

The Psalmist learned to trust when faith came hard. He worshiped and worship puts us in touch with God. In touch with God. As prayers are offered, hymns are sung, the Word is proclaimed, trust replaces agonizing doubt, peace mantles my heart, peace that passes understanding. That is, peace I cannot rationally explain, but peace I *experience*.

In the sanctuary, in the posture of worship, the picture clarifies, my perverted perspective gives way to new perspective; as I worship, I get in touch with God Who has come close to us in the flesh of Jesus. Reality and truth break in on me. I see beyond the chaos a larger screen, a heart and purpose of love, a thread of meaning.

Surely in the awful tragedy and intense suffering that is the daily lot of so many it must seem that God is dead or worse still, that He doesn't know; that He doesn't care. But in His Presence, I know He knows, I know He cares.

Here I hear the story again of His own deep plunge into the depths of our suffering, His own embracing of the worst of our darkness in Jesus, His Son. In the sanctuary I see the cross and I am reminded that God suffers, too; that God was crucified with Jesus on the cross; that the heart of the Eternal breaks with the weight of human sin, rebellion and violence.

In touch with God, I sense that history with its terrible woes and awful suffering is not all there is; that death and defeat will not have the final say; that the God Who has joined us in our darkness will finally make some sense out of this senseless suffering; will yet effect His purposes and cause love to prevail and peace to be the final word.

In worship, in communing with God, I am healed. I see clearly. I trust. I rest in the abyss of God's love. Now I can go on.

Amen.