

Worship: The Medium of Traditioning

Text: Psalm 137:4; I Corinthians 11:26

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? Psalm 137:4

*For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup,
you proclaim the death of the Lord, until he comes. I Cor. 11:26*

On those rare occasions when I get to worship in the pew I like to look at the order of worship, and particularly the scripture lessons. I try to figure out why that Old Testament lesson with that New Testament lesson, and why those two lessons with that sermon subject. I wonder what kind of rabbit the preacher is going to pull out of the hat today. Sometimes I can figure it out and sometimes I am surprised. But, if you had done that today, I don't suppose you got that far. You probably did not get beyond the Old Testament responsive Psalm? "Crushing little ones against the rock and rejoicing in it." Did you get beyond the final verses of Psalm 137? Did it shock you a bit or did you miss it? How could you miss it? No, you didn't miss it. Did you say to yourself, "Is that in the Bible?" Did you say to yourself, "Is that the Word of God?" Well, let me put your fears at rest. That is not the Word of God.

I am not going to talk about those verses, but I can't use Psalm 137 without at least addressing those statements. I wondered whether to even use them in public worship, but then I thought perhaps it could be an occasion to deal rather honestly with some of those expressions in Scripture that seem to us to be so far from what we have learned in Jesus Christ.

Those two verses are venomous statements of anger and hatred. And the expression "crushing little ones against the rock and rejoicing in it" is so crude and brutal as to hardly be conceivable. So let me say a couple of things about it.

The first thing I am going to say is that it is in the Jewish song book, and the song book, The Psalter, is the expression of the deepest human emotions that are offered in the presence of God. There is a wonderful honesty about Jewish religion. The Old Testament is healthy in its honest statement of the human heart and the expression of human emotions. I want to suggest that if you can not identify with the intensity of the anger and the hatred that come to expression in

that Psalm, it may be that you don't really know yourself, because what comes to expression there is a potential expressible by any one of us - if we are sufficiently abused, devastated and defiled. That expression of hatred is an honest human emotion. Not infrequently, I have people come to me and confess their anger or their vengeful feelings, or even their feelings of hatred - they feel guilty about having those emotions. I say to them, "You cannot be guilty about what you feel. You don't determine what you feel. What you feel you feel. You can't think it away."

The healthy aspect of the Jewish relationship to God is that ability to bring the darkest emotion into the presence of God and to leave it there. Maybe the Psalmist of Psalm 137 was healthier and had a more wholesome relationship with God than most of us do. It is a bone-chilling statement, but it is an expression of the depths of which we are capable of feeling. What we feel can only be denied with dishonesty. And why be dishonest in the presence of God? What better way to be freed from the paralysis of such hatred than to bring it to expression before the face of God? So I want to say that this is not the Word of God, that it is a human word of response to God. That's what the Bible is anyway.

In the earlier years of my ministry I never would have dared touch that Psalm because I would have thought that I would have to justify it somehow or other as being a legitimate statement. I can't do that. It is human word. It is an intense, passionate, human word spoken to God. I should say, too, it's 180 degrees from what we learn in Jesus. Jesus radicalized his religion, the religion of his Jewish tradition, when he said, "Love your enemies." Jesus modeled it out on the cross when he said, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." So don't hear me justifying that statement as appropriate, but hear me saying that sometimes human beings can be so debased and dehumanized that there arises that kind of vengeful intensity.

The thing that triggered this statement was that the tormenters, the Babylonians, who had taken them from their land and from their holy city and from their temple, had brought them to Babylon and said, "Sing us a song." We read that in the death camp in Trablanka during the Holocaust, the Nazi guards made sport of the Jewish prisoners, having them sing a little Jewish ditty and do a little dance. Well, these devastated people said to the Babylonians, "We cannot sing God's song in a foreign land."

And that's really why I chose this Psalm. There is a vivid image of their hanging up their harps on the willow tree by the riverbank and saying, "No, here, we can't sing." The Jew was so formed and shaped and determined by the life of worship that happened at Jerusalem and in the temple that to think of bringing the songs of Zion out of that context was unthinkable to them. They couldn't do it. So, in that vivid image, you have the sense of the holiness of the place and the rootedness of the Jew in that temple where the presence of God was. It was in the worship life, in the great festivals, and the annual events and the offering of the

sacrifices through the priesthood in the temple, in the holy place where the name of God dwelled that the heart of the Jew dwelt. In Babylon they couldn't sing. They loved Mount Zion.

Another Psalmist said, "I was glad when they said unto me, let us go to the house of the Lord." The Psalmist of Psalm 42 says, "Why art Thou down cast, O my soul? Why art thou disquieted within me? When I remember Thee, when I remember Jerusalem, when I remember how I went with the pilgrims on festival, then my soul is cast down within me." Oh, they loved Zion. They loved Jerusalem because there, in that sacred place, all of their being was centered, because there God dwelt.

In the New Testament community, Paul had to write to the church at Corinth because they were abusing the Lord's Supper. That gave him an occasion to give to us the tradition that he had received: how Jesus broke bread and poured the cup and said to his disciples, "Do this in remembrance of me." So, for us, the center is no longer the temple in Jerusalem, but the center for us is the table and the bread and the cup. And our life comes back again and again to that celebration - that simple celebration of the breaking of bread and the pouring of the cup, and the remembering of Jesus who loved us and gave himself for us.

What these two scriptures do is they give me an occasion to say that what was true of Israel is true of the Christian church as well. Our worship together can be the medium for traditioning. Usually I think we think of tradition as that understanding and way of life that is passed down, the actual contents of what we believe and how we live together, but tradition can also be a verb and I use it thus this morning. We are called *to tradition* - our children and grandchildren and ourselves. The process of traditioning is the way we are shaped and formed according to the will of God and after the image of Jesus Christ.

We noted last week that the Psalmist of Psalm 78 said, "I will tell a story with a meaning," and then he went on to say that God had commanded that these things not be hid from the children but that the children be instructed in the ways of God. The mighty acts of God in the midst of Israel's history were related in order that the children, the generation as yet unborn, might come to set their hope in God. The Christian community, like Israel, lives by continuing to tell the story. In our encounter with the word of God and our experience of life we are being shaped and formed.

And that spiritual formation of our lives is what we are about in our worship. I want to say to you this morning that worship, I believe, is the primary medium for traditioning the people of God. Now I wouldn't have always said that. I am only somewhat recently coming to appreciate that. I am growing presently in my sense of the importance of worship as a means of traditioning. That's new for me. I am a child of the Reformation. I was raised in the Reformed tradition. The Reformed tradition has been characterized by the clear articulation of the word of preaching. Oh, to be sure, John Calvin spoke of word and sacrament, but we have

been Word, Word, Word. Even our worship has not been worship, but has been word - the sermon dominating.

Word necessarily addresses the mind. So our faith has had an intellectual bent. We have had a *reasonable* faith, and we have prided ourselves on the thoughtfulness of our tradition. I want to say to you this morning that, while I would not take away from the importance of understanding and of clear thinking about faith, I want to say, that we've been wrong in our emphasis. In the way we have shaped our worship, in the way we have nurtured our children, we have been wrong. We looked to Sunday School classes to pass on the faith. But you can't teach God. For the adults the worship service itself was primarily didactic.

Experience of worship is the key to faith. I am pleased that we as a community are growing, I believe, in a deepening sense of the tapestry of worship. The movement of worship, where color, pageantry, dance, song, prayer is woven around the spoken word and create an experience that is more than simply an intellectual exercise. I think it has always been that to some extent, in spite of ourselves, but we have not always had that centrally in focus or clearly understood. I am only stumbling and stammering in my attempt to grasp after it, but what I would hope in our corporate worship together is that, if you would go out after the service and someone would meet you and they would ask, "What happened?" And if you were able to put into a sentence the sermon theme - (how anyone could put into a sentence a sermon theme after I am done I don't know) (Laughter)- then I would hope that you would stop and you would say, "But there was something more. I don't know how to tell you."

There is a book by a philosopher entitled *Surplus of Meaning*. I like that phrase *a Surplus of Meaning*. I would hope that on a given Sunday you could get some insight and some enlightenment that was helpful to you, that you could articulate, but then also be aware that there was some Surplus of Meaning, something beyond that you can't put your finger on, that you simply can't bring to expression. I would hope in your worship experience that something happened, some encounter with the Mystery of God that is Grace. And who knows from which angle it may come if you would learn - I hope we are learning - to worship, to come in with our minds and hearts, our whole being open, expectant, prayerful, waiting. Then maybe a liturgical formula, maybe the sound of water at the baptismal font, maybe the rose or the candle, or a song or an anthem, or maybe just the rumble of the organ would touch you down in your depths.

You see, God cannot be *comprehended*. God must be *apprehended*. Not by my mind thinking, but by my being receiving - intuitively, through my imagination, through feeling - who knows? Now here, now there. This one or that one, but something that is operative beyond that which we can nail down, some surplus of meaning beyond the rational understanding of every prayer and every hymn, and even the sermon itself, beyond a comprehension of the meanings of a biblical text

- something more. That something more is what seeps into our depths and forms and shapes us more than ideas, I think. You know if you go out of here on a Sunday morning with a new idea count yourself lucky and double your offering. (Laughter) But that's not really what it is all about. What it is all about is to be touched in the depths by the God who can only be known in the depths.

I was moved as I viewed a video that I used in the Wednesday night class. The videos are videos of Christian and Jewish and Muslim fundamentalism. In the first half of the course on Wednesday night I showed the videos of the Polish and the Czechoslovakian churches. The films dealt with the suffering that these people endured in the communist era, forty years of an intentional attempt to stamp out religion. And then the falling away of the walls and melting of the curtain, followed by the coming again of openness and freedom of people to worship. I was moved as I saw that and as I saw the faces of the old women with their babushkas who had kept faith alive in their hearts. But what struck me, you know – it was the Catholic Church that did a better job than the Protestant Church in remaining faithful in Poland. In Czechoslovakia there were faithful Reformed pastors there, but there were unfaithful ones too. There were collaborators there.

And the strength that was able to sustain the fire was the church that was imbued in ritual, sacrament and experience! Ideas will not keep you true! Our rational faith can be abated. If it's only this deep it will not stand you in the flood. It is what has seeped down here that enables one to be faithful. That's the traditioning of worship where, beyond doctrinal definitions, I have been gripped, grasped by Grace in my depths, and that comes in worship, in this time together where a gesture, a word, a visual translate, through repetition week in and week out, that which is shaping us even without us consciously thinking about it.

I am so glad when we bring our children in here; we bring them in here so they can worship with us. There are surveys about congregations where children never came in the sanctuary. Then they grew up and never came in the sanctuary either because they had never been exposed to the awe and mystery of God. So we bring them in and next week we will come to receive the bread and the cup, and they will be with us - our children and our grandchildren. Because, you see, what you teach them is important. But that won't do it. Bring them with you. Let them feel the fervor of your faith as you sing your heart out. Let them sense the humility of your heart as you kneel. Let them feel the fire of your faith as you pray. Let the tremor of your body somehow or other be communicated to that child – something that words could never, never express or bring to fruition. You want your children to trust? Bring them to worship.