

Sermon March 11, 2018 A Love that Endures ---Forever Cara B. Hochhalter

Psalm 107 and Ephesians 2:1-10

It is amazing how our scheduled Psalm for this morning, so coincides with the study of St. Francis of Assisi's prayer with which we engaged at the Women's Retreat this weekend.... Both are about seeing the whole of ourselves...you know the prayer...*Make me an instrument of your peace...lead me from injury to pardon, from doubt to faith, from despair to hope, from darkness to light, from sadness to joy...*

Although we learned, shockingly to me, that St. Francis did not actually write this prayer; it was written in *honor* of him during WWI! I wonder how St. Francis who died in 1226 in his 40's, might be smiling to hear people saying this prayer in honor of him.

The last part of his prayer is about not being *whiners*...it is about not always needing to be the one who is understood, loved, and pardoned...but to be the ones who *are* understanding, loving and pardoning!

As a friend of mine from Michigan always says, *love is a verb...go out and do it!* St. Francis certainly did...and not just with animals, but with lepers, with the poor by becoming poor himself, and even with his enemies. We learned this weekend that he joined the Christian crusades to fight the "infidels" who were trying to take over Jerusalem but he was so distraught by this barbaric fighting, that he went to visit the Sultan, who turned out to be a Sufi mystic Muslim.....and through conversation they found common ground in the compassion they shared...even from their differing faiths! He felt closer to the Sultan than the ruthless Crusaders of his own religion! How many of you have ever heard this about St. Francis? Peacemaking and diplomacy at its best!

Let us be in prayer: Infinitely loving God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

This Psalm 107 is in the last section of psalms which are filled with praises and thanksgiving...even in the midst of hardship.....

Isn't that how our times of prayers and concerns often feel...there is grief, and struggle, and deep worries...EVEN as we are filled with thanksgiving and praises? Although, I think we often hold up a lot more concerns...than celebrations.

How DO we give thanks in the midst of suffering? What kind of paradox is this?....

Perhaps we might consider it as holding a balance...like a scale....look at your own life and surely it changes constantly...but does it feel like your scales are more weighted with despair than hope, with doubt than faith...with sadness than joy? If so...how might we create a better balance? How might you increase the thanks and praise part of daily life?

And how much of suffering is our own making... consequences of our own actions...the result of the ways we respond to others and the world around us....How might we see our lives more holistically...seeing both the pain and the sorrows as part of a whole?... a blessed whole through which we have some agency...with the help of God, prayer and community...even as some situations seem beyond our control.

Annie Dillard writes that "Nature works out its complexities. God suffers the world's necessities along with us...God suffers with us. But God surely yearns for us to hold onto expectation for hope and new life... (This is where we are heading this time of Lent going into Easter, right!)

Someone told me that their therapist told them to "pray more and don't look at the news!" Why is news predominantly bad...when the name of this Gospel story is called "The Good News!" In our responsive reading of the Psalm, we heard the repeated refrain, "O that we would praise you for your goodness, O God, and for your wonderful works to the children of all humankind!"

And through all the stories of grief and hardships, our scriptures tell us that God's "steadfast love endures forever." Do you believe it; that a Holy and steadfast love endures---forever? Can we trust that we are held in an enduring love...forever? How freeing that would be and if we could believe this, how might we infuse our whole days with a sense of gratitude and praise...like Brother Lawrence who practiced the presence of God while cooking in a monastery? I think I saw the presence of God watching Sue Wood carefully rolling up dough filled with cilantro pesto at the Women's Retreat!

The other day, I ironed. Big surprise? In cleaning out a closet, Jeff found a pile of old linens that belonged to my grandparents and my mother...they were stained and crumpled...but I could tell they had at one time been beautiful. Jeff washed and bleached them. I took a break from my work on that snow-day we had...and went upstairs, to iron the linen napkins. I got intrigued by the different patterns that started to emerge in the weave of these enormous white napkins...I could see mums, and pansies, oak leaves and some that I thought were onions but then maybe they are

flowers. The bleach had worked and the napkins started to reveal their beauty! I remembered how my mother used to put them in a plastic bag and shake them with a little water to dampen them. I also remembered how she put the ironing board up in front of the TV and watched *Andy of Mayberry* and *I Love Lucy*, while she ironed.

I got in the rhythm of ironing these things...the repetition felt peaceful. I sensed a connection to my mother who has long since passed on. It was an incredible feeling of gratitude and peace....

Kathleen Norris has written a beautiful chapter on praying the psalms in her book *The Cloister Walk*. During her time in a Benedictine Abby, she prayed the psalms regularly and often. This was an enlightening experience for her. Norris writes, "The psalms are poetry, and poetry's function is not to explain but to offer images and stories that resonate with our lives."

Others, too have said that "praying the psalms" can be a transformative act. A good Lenten exercise, for sure! Norris says that being changed by the words of the Psalms, allow them to work on you and sometimes to work you over!"

What would it mean to "pray the Psalms?" I have to admit, I have never done this practice of praying one Psalm a day...meditating on the rhythm of the words and considering how they might *work me over*.

Norris says they make us look at our own situations and to pray over them. The Psalms have a fair amount of lamenting and even ranting when things are not going well...but at the same time, the Psalms are about giving praise! The Hebrew word for praise means "to radiate---to reflect!" What a beautiful idea when thinking about our relationship with God...to praise God means to radiate/reflect that enduring love and light!

Walter Brueggemann writes: "imagine a world without Psalm 107...without cry, without the public processing for pain...Imagine a world that has grown silent and cold of human pain...imagine a world totally silenced, no prayers uttered, no hopes voiced, no hoisting of the human condition and consequently no miracles of newness or healing?"

We certainly felt a renewed spirit of newness and healing at our Women's Retreat...to be in community, to share stories of our lives and faith, and to look ahead to new ways of being people of faith...

It is in our worship with all of you that we experience the comfort and joy of uniting our hearts and our spirits...together....with the Holiness of God and with the beautiful blessing of one another. May and spirit of the Psalmist and the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi find its way into our hearts here in this place...making us all instruments of God's peace, even through the thick and the thin of it!

Amen.