Nu’uanu Congregational Church

The First Sunday in Lent

February 18, 2018

Neal MacPherson

HONEST PRAYER Genesis 9:8–17

 Psalm 25:1–10

 Mark 1:9–15

 One can imagine Jesus in the wilderness for forty days, alone, confronting the power of evil and coming to terms with himself and with God. One can imagine him in prayer, in honest prayer as he prepared himself for his ministry in the world.

 This morning, let us reflect upon the theme of honest prayer. In his book, *What Shall We say: Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith,* Thomas Long describes the time when a pastor friend told him about the day when a very disturbing telephone call came into the office of the church. A part-time staff member had been out in the neighborhood walking his dog when he was mugged and stabbed in the heart. The fellow was rushed to the hospital where he was placed in intensive care with little or no prospect for survival.

 The word of this tragic even spread among the church staff, and they gathered spontaneously in the chapel of the church to pray. Thomas Long’s friend reported that everyone stood around the communion table and offered sincere prayers, but the prayers were mostly polite, filled with mild petitions, and speaking of comfort and hope and changed hearts. They were prayers that seemed to have already accepted the fact of an almost certain death.

 Then the custodian prayed. Long’s friend reported that it was the most “athletic” prayer he had ever witnessed. The custodian

 “wrestled with God, shouted at God, anguished with God. His

finger jabbed the air, and his body shook. ‘You’ve got to save

him! You just can ‘t let him die!’ he practically screamed at

God. ‘You’ve done it many times, Lord! You’ve done it for

others. You’ve done it for me. Now I’m begging you to do it

again! Do it for him! Save him, Lord.’”

The friend of Thomas Long continues to reflect on the prayer of the custodian:

 “It was as if he grabbed God by the lapels and refused to turn

 God loose until God came with healing wings . . . When we

 heard that prayer, we just knew that God would indeed come to

 heal. In the face of that desperate cry to help, God would have

 been ashamed not to save the man’s life.” And so it happened.[[1]](#footnote-1)

 The man’s life may not have been saved. The man might have survived without the prayer, but I think you will agree. The custodian’s prayer was an honest prayer. Most of our prayers are polite, and less than honest. They are sincere prayers, but they fail to reveal the depth of our human experience. (I know that many of the prayers I give in hospital rooms and in memorial services are of the polite variety.) But underneath our cautious words are other words—words of anger, words of frustration, impatient words—but these words never get voiced.

 What we need is more honest prayer. Why? We need more honest prayer simply because life is messy and does not always follow an even pattern. Things happen that are unjust and unfair. Three teachers and fourteen teenagers are killed in a Florida school shooting. The innocent suffer. Bad things happen to good people, through no fault of their own. A child dies of an incurable disease. A car accident takes the life of a young person. A faithful employee is let go for no apparent reason. A dear friend dies on the operating table before her time. Children die of starvation. Government forces in Syria fire upon their own citizens.

 Yes, life for so many is unfair, unjust. And we wonder. Is God responsible for all these things? If God is all-powerful, why do these things happen? It is so unfair. We ask our questions, and we do our best to respond, but in the end there are some things we simply cannot understand.

 But there is one thing we should be able to count on, and that is our relationship with God. And if we have a vital relationship with God, and if that relationship is a covenantal relationship, we have the freedom, surely, to voice prayers that are honest and spoken from the depths of our human experience—prayers, which, in the words of our Prayer of Confession this morning, are

 *Not gentle when it is in anger that we live,*

 *Not smooth when it is desperation that we know,*

 *Not patient when time has narrowed down to now,*

 *Not wise, not neat, not all our fences mended*

 *But words, broken yet honest words, and lost,*

 *Stumbling their way toward silence.*

 The Psalms provide us with many, many examples of honest prayer, and we would do well to learn how to pray by carrying them with us and reading them in times that are good, and in times that are messy and difficult. Read through the psalms and you will find honest pleas for comfort and peace and mercy. You will also find anger, frustration, lament, even calls for vengeance. It is said that there is not a human emotion that is not contained in the language of the psalms.

 Today’s Psalm, the 25th Psalm, is a wonderful example of honest prayer. The Psalmist begins by voicing words of trust and affirmation: “I offer my life to you, Lord; my God, I trust you.” And then the honest plea,

 *Please don’t let me be put to shame!*

 *Don’t let my enemies rejoice over me!*

 *For that matter, don’t let anyone who hopes*

 *in you be put to shame;*

 *instead, let those who are treacherous without*

 *excuse be put to shame.* —Psalm 25:2–3

 (The New Common Bible)

 We gather that the psalmist is being oppressed by enemies who seek to do him harm. He brings his plea to God to be spared the shame of being humiliated by the actions of his enemies against him. Later in the psalm the language becomes even more forthright:

 *My heart’s troubles keep getting bigger—*

 *set me free from my distress!*

 *Look at my suffering and trouble—*

 *forgive all my sins!*

 *Look at how many enemies I have*

 *and how violently they hate me!*

 *Please protect my life!*

 *Deliver me!*

 *Don’t let me be put to shame*

 *because I take refuge in you.* (17-20)

 It does sound rather respectful, this language, but underneath the language there is great passion, and we can almost imagine the psalmist using his arms and hands to make his plea. There is something even more interesting about the Psalmist’s words. In his words, the Psalmist even dares to remind God of God’s own promise to be merciful.

 *Lord, remember your compassion and faithful*

 *love— they are forever!*

*But don’t remember the sins of my youth or my wrongdoing.*

 *Remember me only according to your faithful*

 *love for the sake of your goodness, Lord.* (8-9)

 Notice how the Psalmist dares to instruct God. He instructs God to remember. Now, a word about that rainbow in our Genesis story. God sets the bow in the heavens, and says:

 I have placed my bow in the clouds; it will be the symbol of the

 covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over

 the earth and the bow appears in the clouds, I will remember the

 covenant between me and you and every living being among all

the creatures. Floodwaters will never again destroy all creatures. The bow will be in the clouds, and upon seeing it I will remember the enduring covenant between God and every

 living being of all the earth’s creatures. —Genesis 9:13–16

 This is remarkable. God needs the rainbow as a reminder to never again destroy the earth by a flood. Does this mean that God is prone to forgetfulness? Perhaps so. Perhaps the Psalmist is in on a secret. It may well be that the Psalmist suspects that God can forget, that God can easily become forgetful. Perhaps that is why the Psalmist is free to remind God to be merciful.

 Such honesty in the presence of God is refreshing. There may be a place for prayer that is polite, respectful, and retrained, but there are times when what is called for is prayer that is honest, untidy, angry, and broken. We need hide nothing from God, as if we could, anyway. It is far better to be honest in our prayers. It is far better to speak from the depths of our lives. It is far better to voice our anger and our questions in the face of unmerited suffering. For then we will be brought into a relationship with God that is real and vital. Then we will be “real” and authentic human beings in the presence of God. We may not always understand the ways of God. But we still place our trust in God. We still believe that God, if God is merciful, and we do believe that God is merciful, must surely hear and cannot help but attend to the honest prayers spoken from the depths of our hearts. Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. Thomas Long, *What Shall We Say: Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith* (Grand

Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011) 129-130 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)