

John Sampson
"Be Still"

Text: Genesis 1:24 - 31

Preached at KVCC

July 21, 2019

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

If you've come to see me in my office hours, to share with me a real struggle you are having in your life, I might have said at one point, "Do you ever read the Psalms?"

I might have said that to you because sometimes we have the idea that there are certain things we can't say to God in prayer. Sometimes we feel uncomfortable acknowledging our own true feelings and desires. Sometimes we feel uncomfortable with how we feel about God's presence, or lack thereof, within the struggles of our life.

And I ask if you have read the Psalms because the writers of the Psalms don't always seem to be as concerned as we might in admitting their feelings, and telling God exactly what we think of her.

There are Psalms, and I think today's Psalm is one of them, that come directly from the heart, in a very unvarnished and unforgiving way.

I think the Psalm we just heard read is the perfect Psalm for today, because it opens with an image of the destructive power of words, and of those who use them for their own gain, without regard for others.

This has been a week of words, of mighty ones boasting and making mischief. It has been a week of razor sharp tongues, and the working of treachery. There have been some this week who seem to love evil more than good, and of loving words that devour.

That is all I will say about this. I think many others have spoken about what they think of the meaning, and hurt of the words used in our nation over this week. I also am not going to say any more about this because this is the world we live in. It seems like we will be living for the foreseeable future with deceitful tongues in the public sphere. I take the Psalm's opening meditation on the destructive power of words, as not a possibility in our lives, but as its given state.

When I first read this Psalm I wasn't so taken with its statement on words, as I was with the Psalmist's response. Because it is here, and maybe this is a terrible comment on the state of our nation, but it is here in the response to the words of destruction that I actually first began to feel uncomfortable. Because I felt the response of the Psalmist is both so familiar, and so problematic to how I want to understand myself.

I ask people who come and see me if they have read the Psalms because I want them, and all of us to be able to pray honestly from our hearts, no matter what comes up, and what the feelings we express really are. Because, like it or not, what we say at those moments may be more true, than when we are guarded and self-conscious about being right, and good, and nice.

In this Psalm today we hear the writer of the hymn respond to the mighty honestly, and with truth.

The writer expresses a hope that God will break down the mighty, and will uproot from the land of the living, in other words, will kill the one saying all of the lies cause harm to themselves and their community.

When you heard the words our national leaders shared this week via tweets, and radio talk shows, on the floor of the house, and on cable television what was your response? What was the prayer that welled up in your heart? What was the fantasy that took form before your inner eyes?

Whatever it was, that is a truth as true as the fact of your sitting here this morning. And it shouldn't be denied.

But then the Psalmist goes further. After saying that he, or she, would get no greater pleasure than the opportunity to be able to laugh over the fall of the wealthy, the author now goes on to create an image of themselves in contradistinction to how they understand the one who uses words to devour.

And what a wonderful image it is.

The Psalmist, the one who understands themselves to be aligned with God, images themselves to be lively and upright like an olive tree. They will endure forever, even if their adversary falls and passes away. Where the one who has a razor tongue is evil, the Psalmist is the epitome of the good.

Here too we see a truth, the truth of how the Psalmist needs to understand themselves, needs to create an image of themselves, to deal with the deep hurt and pain and inhumanity of the words caused by the mighty. The creation of the pure and righteous self is a straightforward psychological response to an ongoing threat from another, whether that be an individual, or a group.

When you heard the hateful words our leaders blasted our nation with this week, what did you think of them, and what did you think of yourself? Did you imagine our leaders to be other than yourself, and your community? Did you imagine them to be without the image of God shining out from within their humanity?

I think it takes a great deal of courage and honesty to answer these kinds of questions. And yet, this is exactly what our teacher Jesus challenges us to do in the saying we heard in our first reading.

I want to be absolutely clear about my position here. Jesus never says don't take the spec out of your neighbor's eye. We are called to actively resist and fight against racism wherever it is to be found in our nation. Our teacher, and our tradition, demand that we welcome the stranger and the alien, and that fight for the humanity of the most marginalized of our community and our nation. We have been created in love, and our God tells us to love each other as ourselves.

No ifs, ands, or buts about it.

But what Jesus does challenge us to do is to make sure we are doing our own internal work, removing the timber from our own eyes, so that we can see clearly when we call attention to the blindness of those around us.

I ask people if they have read the Psalms to give them permission to say out loud the words that truly live in their hearts. I believe this is the first step in allowing God's spirit to work in our lives. But our work can't stop there. We can't stop by saying we wish our adversaries are dead, or that we will take pleasure from their fall, or that we hope God break them forever. Jesus invites us to move beyond, not instantly, and not dishonestly, but through long and sustained inner work, to come to the point where we can say that we actually love our neighbors, even if we oppose their words, and their inhumanity.

I want share a story about something that happened here in this church, right here in this sanctuary. And I'm sorry for my faulty memory. But the way I recollect what happened is this. We had some kind of after worship meeting, maybe it was about being Open and Affirming, but maybe not. And during the time when all those attending were invited to share their feelings a woman stood up and said something like, "Oh I hate those Republicans who..." After the discussion a different woman came up to me and said, "That woman just told me she hated me. Right here."

This is the challenge of those of us who identify ourselves as liberals. Of those who watch the deeds, and hear the words, and experience the silences of our leaders as our nation, which we love so deeply, becomes a place that might not be recognizable to us anymore. It is not to sit passively by. It is not to call out our leaders and hold them to a certain standard. It is to also commit to looking within and working on

taking the timber, or the branch, or the speck, out of our own eyes, out of our own hearts, and not let ourselves be filled with hate, and division, and othering, and not to be too sure that we are so secure in our own purity.

Because if we don't commit to our own inner work, we can't be the people that God needs us to be at this time and in this place.

Amen.