

*Based on Psalm 22. Praising God in the Church.*

With the notable exception of the 23rd Psalm, Psalm 22 is the most recognizable of these biblical hymns. We just don't know that we know it.

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* is how Psalm 22 begins, this first verse made famous by the cry of Jesus from the cross. The cry of so many of us when we suffer unjustly, or even justly. Suffering so deep that so many of us feel as if God has given up on us altogether. Or perhaps even worse: suffering so deep we feel there is no other option but to turn around and give up on God.

My guess is many and perhaps all of us here today know something of that kind of suffering, including yours truly. Which is why, when I found myself inspired by Rev. Harry Daniel to share a testimony of my own journey, I knew the suffering of humanity was where I would need to begin. And, like, Rev. Daniel, the beginning of my personal knowledge of that suffering, first growing up in northern Virginia not far from here and then in North Alabama, where Christopher and I just spent our vacation with my family, was wrapped up in race.

At the time, growing up, I knew nothing of the term *social justice*. I simply knew that something was profoundly wrong in an elementary school where the only Black people I saw were also poor and in a middle school where the vitriol of teenagers directed at me and my mixed race *not-poor* Black and Asian boyfriend was severe enough to sabotage what otherwise might have turned into a really good thing. Not to mention the first time I heard about the concept of being gay, in high school, where it was uttered as a slur at the one Asian guy who braved his way through our midst.

Church was no real help in all of this, although to be fair the United Methodist congregation where I was baptized and confirmed at the age of 12 was, in comparison to the rest of the Bible belt, raging liberal. They tried, in a nice southern White genteel way, to say "can't we all just get along?" without ever taking a good hard look at the deeper forces that perpetuate unjust suffering, what we now know to be called *structural racism*.

Once I met the transcendentalist poets in high school English class at the exact same time our church leaders hired a new youth director who insisted our nation was founded on Christian principles, when I knew darn well the founders were mostly Deists, I put up no fight when our family abruptly stopped attending because my Dad got mad that a fitness class was given priority for reserving space at the church over his Boy Scout Troop.

Ah, the church, God bless the church, we do know how to make a mess of what truly matters.

I planned on becoming a Buddhist once I went off to college, not because it had become the "cool religion" that it is today, but because I just did not want to be the kind of Christian I saw all around me. Instead, pure peer pressure led me to the Presbyterian campus ministry, which turned out to combine a deep embrace to all who walked through the door with a profound compassion for those who suffer beyond ourselves, all while insisting we need not check our brain at the door but instead learn how to love God with our minds, as well as with our

hearts. Mix in the emerging scholarship of the Jesus Seminar, headlined by John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, and I finally found a Jesus I could believe in and a church that encouraged that belief.

But then came feminism, and the reality check that religion is the world's greatest purveyor of patriarchy. Which led me to start a women's group through our campus ministry, which led to the discovery of feminist theology, which led to the discovery of liberation theology, which insists, as its point of departure, that the God of the Bible consistently sides with those who are oppressed and therefore those among us who benefit from power and privilege are called to radical solidarity, as *Prophets in Pharaoh's court*, with those who suffer structural injustice.

All of which led to spending my twenties as the Director of the National Network of Presbyterian College Women, implementing feminist theology and social justice ministry on campuses around the country, while recruiting young women for ministries of justice and wholeness throughout the world.

It was fabulous!

The best of the church opened up to me through this work: from meeting Desmond Tutu at a Montreat Collegiate Conference to representing the denomination at the World Council of Churches Ecumenical Festival in Zimbabwe; from supporting a student-turned Mission Co-Worker in Bolivia to joining a seminar on Christian Zionism hosted by the Sabeel Center for Palestinian Liberation Theology in Jerusalem; from worshiping with the grandmothers and grandfathers of the More Light movement to seeking advice and counsel from an old southern White guy pastor who helped recruit a young and upcoming Martin Luther King, Jr. to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. All while walking with young women in college and beyond through their joys and their struggles and their questions and their hopes.

I thought I would never leave. But the church, God bless the church, we do know how to make a mess of what truly matters.

The worst of the church opened up to me through this work: the seductive power of money used to thwart our strongest commitments; the perpetual disempowerment of Black and Indigenous leaders; the sacrifice of college women as pawns of the anti-gay agenda; death threats directed specifically at me, as well as to the denomination's leaders for allowing our pro-gay ministry to exist. All of which could have, and by all rights should have, sent me running to the hills, but instead gave me an even deeper understanding of who Jesus was and what he was about.

One of my colleagues likes to say, *If you are going to do this job, you have to look good on wood!* Which eventually became an invitation to connect the suffering of others with the suffering of my own body, mind and spirit. Such suffering took the form of massive guilt for serving in a national church ministry that required me to represent the anti-gay stance of our denomination at the time, even as my students all knew I was part of the movement to change that stance. Such suffering took the form of PTSD from multiple situations, including what I have shared with you previously about my experience with gun violence. And such suffering took the form of

addiction and mental health struggles that knocked me on my rear at what should have been the prime of my life.

I, too, have cried out, as Jesus did, as those who suffer the most unjustly in this world do, *My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?* Only to find, upon careful examination, that it is actually God's *people* who have done most of the forsaking. Making that distinction - between God and God's people, the church - has probably been the most spiritually mature thing I have ever had to do, second only to the abject horror of having to admit that I, too, am *one of those people*, that I, too, cause so much unjust suffering in this world and through the church, usually without even knowing it.

Which is where grace comes in, through the suffering.

For the Psalmist, grace through the suffering comes from stories of the ancestors, who ask for help when all hope seems lost, and God finds a way to make a way when it seems like there really is no way. For the Psalmist, grace through the suffering comes from claiming his identity as God's Beloved Child, first and foremost, above all else, safe on his mother's breast. For the Psalmist, grace through the suffering comes from literal liberation: deliverance from the horns of wild oxen, salvation from the mouth of the lion.

For me, grace through the suffering has come from a momentary drop of water in the literal and spiritual desert. For me, grace through the suffering has come from learning the really hard way how to forgive myself and others. For me, grace through the suffering has come from the darkness of clinical depression, and an experience I can only describe as *crossing over to the other side* where there is no pain and no sorrow and no suffering. Only love.

There remains a tension in my soul between this profound, universal grace I have experienced through my own personal suffering and the call to solidarity with the unjust suffering of the world that has been my passion from the beginning. It is a tension that resonates, I think, with the identity of this congregation, where we say, on the one hand, *we choose welcome* for everyone, while at the same time committing to the work for justice in the world. Working for justice means taking a stand, which can make it feel as if those who are uncomfortable with that stand by rights do not feel welcome. I get that.

And yet ...

For me, with the places I have been and the people I have met in those places ingrained on my soul, grace without justice becomes too much like the nice southern White genteel seemingly liberal church of my adolescence that sweeps structural injustice under the rug without taking a good hard look at itself. On the other hand, at least in my experience with those same places and people, justice without grace feels too much like hell, with no promise of a peace that truly passes understanding as we wait and wait and wait for the justice we seek to prevail.

In order for me to continue in ministry with any kind of sanity, I have to find another way, a middle way as the Buddhists would say, an integration of these two seeming opposites, which is often the heart of spiritual wisdom. As it turns out this congregation's Statement of Identity offers that way: *we are committed to being and becoming people of radical compassion*, we say, right there in between our statement of welcome and our statement of justice. Compassion is the link that holds grace and justice in creative and liberating tension.

Compassion, of course, means *to suffer with*. To lay down our own suffering alongside the suffering of the world and place it all in the hands of a God who just wants us to be well. To trust God is working overtime through all time to make it so. And to hold fast to the conviction that we, in our own small way, get to be a part of the healing of the world.

*We have to forgive the church for being the church*, one of my mentors likes to say, *and help it become the kingdom of God*. For all who cry out, *My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?* we who join in The Way and The Spirit of Jesus, forgiving God's people who know not what they do - and even sometimes forgiving those who know exactly what they do - we who have committed to the reign of God in our midst have the balm of compassion to offer ourselves and others, the link that holds grace and justice in creative and liberating tension, as we join the Psalmist in praising the One who hears our cries ... and responds!