

Reflection
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July 26, 2015
17th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Psalm 145:10-18

All your works shall give thanks to you, Oh Lord, and all your faithful shall bless you. The Lord is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings. The Lord is near to all who call on him, and to all who call on him in truth. The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.

And there is more.

This is a beautiful psalm, comforting and reassuring, one of David's psalms. A psalm of great faith. In this psalm David sings about what God is and what God does. As Alex McNeill asked when he preached here in May - who or what do we say God is? You may remember his saying that when we try to comprehend God we are like oysters trying to describe a ballerina.

This is a story of how this psalm speaks to me.

The Lord upholds all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down.

On June 1, 2010, my sister died, days after her 59th birthday. She was 3 years younger than I and my only sibling. Lee had a husband and two daughters; the younger one was graduating from college later that month. She was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2004, had surgery, was OK, and then it metastasized into liver cancer in early 2010.

In the first few months afterwards I went through cycles that are probably familiar to many of you - shock, grief, normalcy, shock, grief. It takes so much energy to grieve – there is no escape, it enters into every nook and cranny of life. I was having trouble sleeping, and then the times I did sleep I had so many dreams that were exhausting. Dreams that my husband Joe died and I could not find his body. Joe had had a bad fall in 2009, and was continuing to recover.

I dreamt that my mother died. I knew that my 89 year old mother would never be the same, and 2 months after Lee died she was rushed to U VA to have a heart valve replaced. Her heart had literally broken.

I was afraid that I was going to be alone. I believed I had to carry everyone and I wasn't used to being an only child. And I was physically worn down. At that time we were living in Vienna, Virginia and I was commuting back and forth to Shepherdstown to work. At first I tried to pray but I couldn't - I would just cry and I felt so frustrated. And then someone suggested that perhaps crying was what I was supposed to be doing.

During that summer one of the pastors at Vienna Presbyterian where we were members called and told me I needed to sign up for a program called Growing Your Soul. This was a small group, intensive spiritual development program with a rigorous curriculum and reading list. I resisted, I was not ready, etc. But sometimes the voice of love is a slightly bossy one – when your pastor suggests something and is persistent, you listen. In September our diverse group of

women who I didn't really know began meeting. Every Wednesday evening through the following May we met to reflect and share. I began to read (and read and read) and understand more about spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines are regular practices that are transforming, whether that is prayer, silence, hospitality, worship, meditation, or spiritual friendship. We read Adele Calhoun's *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, where she describes more than 60 spiritual disciplines, including such things as "control of the tongue" and "unplugging".

I read some of Frank Laubach's letters. He was a missionary to the Philippines and a seminal figure in the adult literacy movement. He wrote "I want to learn how to live so that to see someone is to pray for them". And Susanne Wesley, who wrote "Help me Lord to make a true use of all disappointments and calamities in life". I was inspired by Madame Guyon, the French mystic who spent 8 years in prison, and believed that the purpose of reading scripture was not to learn but to experience the presence of God.

The Enneagram, Centering Prayer, developing a Rule of Life, practicing the Sabbath, journaling, more reading. I filled notebooks journaling – getting up at 4:30 AM to write and then drive to Shepherdstown.

Over the months my focus slowly turned away from me and towards God. Reading about how others experienced and understood God helped me cultivate a greater awareness of God's presence with me, which helped manage my fear.

My sister was an ordained Presbyterian minister who had deep and wide spiritual beliefs and practices. So often during this period I wanted to pick up the phone and talk about the things I was experiencing, the people we were reading, and the spiritual practices. Sisterhood is a unique and complex relationship. In my case, we were close and we loved each other very much, and we were so different. We had our little comparisons and inevitable resentments. I have learned to let those go and forgive myself for them. There were things my sister knew about me that no one else does and she took those things with her, thank goodness.

I began to pray for clarity about a move to Shepherdstown. The prospect seemed overwhelming; we had been in Vienna for 23 years. But we moved here in 2011 and it has calmed my life. We find this place healing, not only our own School of Love at SPC, but the sheer physical beauty, the pace of life, the love of and care for the earth that is shared by so many. We will celebrate my mother's 95th birthday this fall; she continues to inspire me. I was bowed down, and I have been raised up.

You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.

It's not easy to believe that God satisfies the desire of every living thing. If so, why do 21,000 people die from hunger each day? If my desire had been satisfied Lee would still be with us. But I know that I longed to stop grieving, I longed for peace, and I have been satisfied.

The Lord is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds. The Lord is just in all his ways and kind in all his doings.

I believe that everyone has a hole in their heart. That the shock of a loss does not dim, but that the spaces between the moments of shock get longer. I believe that healing comes from the words and actions of others, through the faithful teachers who have gone before us, and by way

of any number of spiritual disciplines that feel right and can change as the need arises. I believe that healing can come from opening the book of Psalms to just about any page.

I believe that God is so accessible to us.

And I believe that to have faith like David is a choice. That there is more good than evil operating in the world. I choose to believe that – although it certainly is not based on hard evidence. But I believe for every act of mindless terror there are a million acts of love that are unseen and that make a difference.

The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

Nan Merrill interprets portions of this Psalm as follows:

“The time is nigh for you to choose, for great is the new dawn that fast approaches; I call each of you to open your inner ears, to see with spiritual eyes, and to trust that even amidst the outward chaos, all is working toward the wholeness of humanity”.

And I see the wooden sign that hangs in the entrance to my sister’s house; it simply says “Blessed Be”.

Thanks be to God.