

When Church Hurts

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Based on Psalm 55. Betrayal by a Colleague. Gregorian Chant Version.

It sounds different when we hear it this way, does it not? Harsh words of vengeance smoothed over with a soothing chant. Harsh emotions of fear and anguish woven through a tender tenor, released into thin air.

If we read only the words of the biblical text, we might recoil instead in horror. The psalmist describes heart-wrenching betrayal by the psalmist's colleague in ministry, while at the same time the city they love is ravaged by their common enemies.

The congregation depends on the psalmist and the psalmist's colleague to band together to repel their enemies. Instead, the psalmist's colleague has betrayed their partnership with misconduct and deceit, throwing a victory over their enemies into doubt.

The psalmist is bereft: *It is not my enemies who taunt me*, the psalmist says. *I could bear that. It is not adversaries who deal insolently with me*, the psalmist continues. *But it is you ... my companion. ... With words that were softer than oil, but in fact were drawn swords.*

Filled with fury over all of it, the psalmist wants vengeance. *Humble them*, the psalmist breaks down lamenting, as I have been humbled. Make them hurt the way I hurt.

Cast them down into the lowest pit, O God, the psalmist insists.

LET DEATH COME UPON THEM!

In the meantime, escape feels like the only option. *O that I had wings like a dove!* the psalmist cries. *I would flee far away ... find a shelter for myself from the raging wind and tempest. I would lodge in the wilderness ... and be at rest.*

Did you hear all of that in the chant?

The lament, the self pity, the desire to flee, the fear, the betrayal, the curses?

The death wish?

It is all there, I promise you. A lot less like poetry and a lot more like a chaotic vacillation of emotional outbursts frozen in time and turned into Scripture.

This psalm is a tantrum.

Until it is chanted ... and released ... like a Buddhist in meditation ... simply noticing the whirlwind of emotions ... oh ... that is what betrayal feels like ... like a river ... here is some self-pity, look at that ... perhaps with a touch of compassionate curiosity ... rage and vengeance, how interesting ... simply letting them flow ... on ...

That is what happened for me on sabbatical, as I retraced my journey and the whirlwind of emotions, and told the truth about what hurt, and let it go.

Here with SPC, we know the truth of church hurt all too well. So many of us carry it for so many different reasons. We have been excommunicated because we are gay. We have been indoctrinated with guilt over simply existing. We have been kept silent because we are women. We have had guns pointed in our faces because we are peacemakers.

And then there is the broader church hurt we all carry in the face of Christian nationalism. Not just today's version but all the ways institutional Christianity has co-opted The Way of Jesus in service of imperial power when that Way was always meant to transform imperial power, instead.

For me, though, my church hurt is more like the psalmist's. I *expect* the church, in many ways, to be sexist and racist and homophobic and imperial. Not necessarily because that is the fundamental nature of Christianity writ large but because that is the fundamental nature of HUMANITY writ large.

For me, the great shock came when I found the alternative. The SPC kind of church. I knew it existed in the Black Church, but to find it among White folks! Wow!

That is why the betrayal in my Tucson congregation was so hard to shake. I can bear the taunting of enemies, as the psalmist says. I can hide from the insolence of my adversaries. But to be betrayed by the good guys — that was just too much. It has affected me ever since, including in my ministry with you.

And for that, I am very sorry.

Like the psalmist, when we are hurt, we just want to escape. Fly as far as we can on the wings of a dove and be

done with it already. The temptation to denounce and desist is fierce. I know that temptation well.

But the psalmist remains.

I call upon God, the psalmist sings. Even when all others have failed me. *God will hear my voice*, the psalmist insists.

I will trust in God.

At the end of the day, the psalmist's reliance on God becomes invincible, even when the psalmist's enemies — both far off and really close — seem to prosper. And perhaps that really is the point.

At least it has been for me.

God has been with me through all of it. Bigger than the church. More reliable than the church. More worthy of our worship than the church.

God just IS.

The truth is that people will always fail us — including church people — whether it is the really big failure of active harm and deceit or the seemingly small failure of simply not being able to be who we want each other to be.

SPC will fail us, too. We are human after all. We get it wrong, too.

We keep coming back anyway.

The spiritual writer Anne Lamott describes it this way: *The only people I know* — Lamott says — *who have what I want — connection, gratitude, joy — are people with a deep sense of spirituality ... in community ... They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own little candle; and they are part of something beautiful.*

At our best, in the church, this is who we really are. We bake casseroles and we knit prayer shawls. We protect the vulnerable and we put our bodies on the line for the sake of justice. We hurt each other and we forgive each other. We sing and we pray and we dance. We make meaning out of rocks.

In the church, even now, on the other side of the hurt, with the psalmist, our chaotic vacillation of emotional outbursts flows ... and the rhythm builds ... and the song is joined ... with others who have their own stories ...

and their own stones of sorrow to place on the cairn ... and the chanting soothes ... and the tender tenor weaves it all together ... and we are not alone anymore ... and that is enough.