

Sung prayer -

“Oh God who made the heart and ear,
we listen carefully as you draw near,
to hear your word in many ways,
and live your life through out our days.”

Each morning, as the sun rises, I pray the old prayer, “Lord, open my lips and my mouth shall declare your praise,” and then I read aloud the Psalm of the day from the readings in The Revised Common Lectionary on Vanderbilt Divinity School’s website.

Sometimes on a morning, I stretch out my hands to the world, open my heart to it, and the world stretches out its hands and opens its heart right back to me.

Guess what?

There’s a Psalm for that.

Sometimes on a morning, I look closely and listen carefully and see and hear only hatred, injury, fear, despair, shadows and sadness.

Guess what?

There’s a Psalm for that.

And sometimes on a morning, I roll Sisyphus’ boulder of guilt and shame up the steep hill of regret over and over and over again until I feel like I can’t roll it no more.

Guess what?

There’s a Psalm for that.

I like the Psalms.

I like the way they show me how to be human.

I like the way they show me how we humans attempt to understand and talk about God.

I like the way God shows up in the cracks and crevices of the way we try to pray the Psalms, like a dandelion growing through a crack in the concrete on the sidewalk between Stone Avenue and our dining hall at Triune Mercy Center.

Gritty and golden.

Graceful and good.

God.

That's how God shows up.

So we come to our Psalm for this morning.

Psalm 50.

Verses 7-15.

Remember, this Psalm, as are all the Psalms, is a poem.

As a writer, and a practicing poet myself, I love this.

Writing poetry is a pilgrimage to discover the essence of things.

In our case, it's a pilgrimage to discover the essence of the answer to the question, "What can I give to God?"

Do you ever ask that question?

What can we give God?

The poet of our Psalm uses a common poetic device that you find in Hebrew poetry - Parallelism.

In each pair of lines, the second one goes a bit deeper than the first one to help us look closely and listen carefully to what we need to see and hear.

In this Psalm, the poet wants us to know God is speaking from high up on the mountain to a people low down on the earth.

Notice how our passage begins.

"Are you listening, dear people?"

What an important question for us in our world today.

For in a world where most of us speak twice as much as we listen instead of listening carefully to what our neighbor has to say, God asks us, "Are you listening, dear people?"

"Spread for me a banquet of praise, serve High God a feast of kept promises, and call for help when you're in trouble - I'll help you, and you'll honor me."

Praise, Promise and Prayer

If we are listening, perhaps we can hear three questions in our Psalm today -

What does it mean to praise God?

What does it mean to keep our promises to God?

What does it mean to pray to God?

In the answers to each of these questions, we'll see and hear the God of the upside down kingdom of heaven, who acts quite differently from the gods (little g gods) of the kingdoms of the world.

For the God of the upside down kingdom of heaven is NOT concerned with what is on the outside of us.

No, the God of the upside down kingdom of heaven is concerned with what is inside our hearts.

What can we give God?

What is inside our (often) cracked and broken hearts, our humble and holy hearts, that grow gritty little dandelions of love?

Stories

I. Praises

What is the first thing God asks from our cracked and broken heart, our humble and holy hearts?

PRAISES - to serve God and our neighbors with our hands and our feet - the words of every person on Earth, the words of every book in every library on Earth belong to God

One morning, Madu walked the mile from his village to our house at the mission station just outside of the town of Kenieba in Mali, West Africa.

He is married to Sirima and they have two children – four-year-old Sira, who everyone calls Bonnie, and two-year-old Musa, who everyone calls Papa.

Madu is a farmer, a teacher, and, more than anything else, a friend.

"Papa burned his hand this morning," he said with a worried look on his face and a soft tremble in his voice.

"A pot of sauce spilled on him when we were taking it off of the fire. Do you have any medicine we could use to put on the burn?"

I turned to the section on the treatment of burns in our trusty book *Where There Is No Doctor*.

"Did the burn cause blisters?" I asked with a combination of broken Malinke and hand gestures.

"Yes," Madu answered in his broken English and a nod of his head. "It's really bad."

“Let’s take some soap, sterile gauze, scissors and antibiotic ointment and see if we can help him,” I said.

“I man to tu,” he responded, which is the Malinke way to say, “You have done enough,” the way to say, “Thank you.”

When we arrived at his village, the people greeted us and we greeted them.

Malinke people have a long list of greetings and blessings they give to each other when they pass each other along the road and in the village.

They know the person who is standing before them is more important than anywhere they have to go or anything they have to do in the day.

I was learning the greetings and the blessings, learning this very human way of living life.

“Hera sita?” I asked.

In English, this means, “Is there peace here today?”

“Hera dorong,” they answered. “Peace only.”

This is kind of like the way we greet each other all across the United States.

“How are you doing?” someone will ask.

“Fine,” we will answer, even when things are not fine.

Of course, there was no peace in the village that morning.

Everything was not fine.

I could hear it in the strained voices of the people, and could see it in the tired looks on their faces.

Sirima was working, preparing the food for lunch.

She had Papa tied around her back in the traditional way of African baby carrying.

With large, sad eyes Papa pressed his cheek against Sirima’s back and hung his injured hand loosely at his side.

I greeted Sirima and looked at Papa’s hand.

Most of the skin had been burned off of his wrist and lower arm.

Some skin was hanging from the wound.

I could see raw, charred flesh on his little arm, wrist and hand.

Sirima held Papa tightly and tenderly as we cleaned the wound.

I washed his hand and wrist with soap and water.

Madu cut away the dangling skin with the scissors.

I coated the gauze with the antibiotic ointment.

Madu gently placed it over the burn and wrapped an Ace bandage around the gauze.

Together, we helped Papa through his pain and tears.

We were afraid but we worked together.

As we were washing, cutting, coating and bandaging Papa's wound, as he was screaming and crying out in pain, I was acutely aware that I am not a doctor.

I am only a person who wants to help the world.

I was acutely aware that I was planted in a field of suffering where many people were hurting every day and the only thing I could offer to alleviate that suffering and help that hurting were my frail hands and my humble heart.

II. Promises

What is the second thing God asks from our cracked and broken heart, our humble and holy hearts?

PROMISES - to serve God and our neighbors with our hands and feet - to say we are going to do it, and do it

Volunteers leave bottled water for migrants in deadly smuggling corridor (Julian Resendiz) (July 13, 2024)

SUNLAND PARK, New Mexico (Border Report) – The rocks are jagged, and the sand is hot. The 12- to 24-inch wide paths often trail off 100 feet down. A fall from Mount Cristo Rey means broken bones and possibly death.

But it is the sun, that burns the skin and leaves lips dry, that has claimed the most lives of people coming over the mountain from Mexico and proceeding to the New Mexico desert. Nonprofits tracking border medical examiners' offices and Customs and Border Protection data say the Sunland Park-Santa Teresa migrant corridor is one of the deadliest in America.

That's why a group of volunteers on Saturday accompanied El Paso Catholic Diocese Bishop Mark J. Seitz up the mountain, with a statue of Christ the Redeemer on top, and placed water bottles in spots they believe migrants stop to rest.

"I am extremely concerned about people dying in the desert. The number are unimaginable. Since October, it was sitting at 119 last week. Very often women, men in their late teens, 20s are collapsing and dying," Seitz said. "Whatever our position on immigration, I don't think anybody can agree that the death of people is a fitting response, a solution. What we simply are trying to do is to make it possible for people who may find themselves without water in the middle of the desert to have a drink."

Providing water to unauthorized migrants in the past has landed do-gooders in trouble with the law. In Arizona, a volunteer with the nonprofit No More Deaths was charged with felony harboring of migrants after the U.S. Border Patrol saw him give water and food to two migrants in the desert near Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge a few years ago.

On Saturday, Border Patrol agents on horseback passed near Seitz's group twice without incident. One agent approached the group to ask how they were doing. "You guys, be safe," the agent said.

A volunteer who knows someone in the Border Patrol struck a casual conversation with the agent as two other border agents apprehended an unauthorized migrant hiding on the mountain no more than 50 yards away.

Marco Raposo, director of the Diocese's Peace and Justice Ministry, said the volunteers' "water drop" had no political connotations.

"For me, it is an act of faith. It is also an act of humanity in the sense that (the migrants) are people like me. We bleed the same," Raposo said. "It has absolutely nothing to do with politics. Of course, we live in a country that has borders, that has policies – I'm not denying that. That may be why we have to do this, but our motivation comes from the fact this person is a person like me, that has the same rights, same dreams and deserves a chance to live."

Others said pilgrims walk to the summit of the holy mountain all the time. This was the same, but in addition to prayer it included the gift of water, and perhaps life.

What an example of what it means to keep a promise to God.

III. Prayers

What is the third thing God asks from our cracked and broken heart, our humble and holy hearts?

PRAYERS - to know that we cannot build a new humanity, that we cannot make the world a better place for everyone, without God's walking and working with us, without us leaning on Jesus and leaning on each other

Bill Withers was born in West Virginia in 1938 and could have easily started working at the coal mines, like most other black men in his hometown. Instead, he joined the army at 17 and stayed in the US Navy for nine years. After he left the force, he started playing music and happened to meet the right people at the right time. He eventually ended up in Los Angeles and signed a record deal with Sussex Records.

His lyrics are poetic but worded so simply, that there's no doubt about what he wanted to say. One of his goals was to write lines that people would be able to understand and remember easily. "Lean On Me" meets the criteria. The meaning behind the song shows the songwriter's optimistic and vulnerable side. It was released in 1972 as the first single from his second album, Still Bill. Withers used the lyrics to reflect on his rural upbringing and the sense of community he had witnessed, the songwriter shared in an interview with SongFacts.

His experience was that most people were willing to "help out," he said. "Even in the rural South, there were people who would help you out even across racial lines," Withers explained.

When he wrote "Lean on Me," he had just bought a Wurlitzer electric piano. "I was sitting there just running my fingers up and down the piano," he told SongFacts. As he was playing the phrase "Lean on me" crossed his mind. He used it as a prompt and wrote the lyrics around the question "What could lead someone to say those words?"

"Lean On Me" speaks to its audience directly, as if a friend was singing to the person listening. It was a successful recipe. People fell in love with the track.

And call me in a day of distress/need
I will deliver you, and you will make heavy/honor me (kavod)

(Trevor's Prayer)

Homeless, hungry Jesus,

with no place to lay your head,

with no food to fill your backpack,

you are a stranger to those of us who pass you by, but we are not strangers to you.

We distance ourselves from you, but you distance yourself from no one, especially the smallest and most forgotten of us.

Help us look closely and listen carefully with compassion on those without a place to live and food to eat.

May they find a home so they won't have to sleep on the street tonight, and food so they won't go hungry.

Give us who are housed and full kind hearts to bring you and others experiencing homelessness and hunger into our houses and to our tables.

We ask this through you, Lord, our homeless, hungry Jesus.

Amen.

Benediction

Now may the Lord open our eyes that we may see the needs of others
Open our ears that we may hear their cries;
Open our hearts so that they need not be without succor;
Let us not be afraid to defend the weak because of the anger of the strong,
Nor afraid to defend the poor because of the anger of the rich.
Show us where love and hope and faith are needed,
And use us to bring them to those places.
And so open our eyes and our ears
That we may this coming day be able to do some work of peace for thee.
Amen.

– Alan Paton (1903-1988)