

“Hard Words: Honest Faith”
Psalm 13/II Corinthians 4:7-12
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I. Introduction

As I was rummaging through some old files this week I came across a few words I'd written down from an interview I heard on National Public Radio. I don't know who said them, or the context, but they are entitled “Truths Children Learn About Life:”

“Never let your mother brush your hair when she's mad at your father.”

“Never trust your dog to guard your food.”

“Never hit your sister back.....the second person always gets caught.”

“And.....never, ever, hide that last piece of broccoli in your glass of milk.”

I have a true story to go with that last bit of wisdom. As my wife Jeanne tells the story, one evening during dinner when she was a child her sister Deirdre was not thrilled about the charge from her father to “Finish your liver, then you can be excused.” So Deirdre did what any kid might do, she hide the last few bits of liver in her glass of milk. Certain she was excused from the table with her empty plate, Deirdre got up from her place at the table. Seeing her empty plate her dad said, “That's fine. Now finish your milk.” Jeanne reports that after a moment's hesitation Deirdre drank her milk with a straight face.....liver and all. No one tried to hide anything in their milk after that.

Truths about life.....there are also truths about faith that we are invited to discover and learn and believe. Certainly some of those truths are filled with joy, wonder, grace and beauty. We give thanks and celebrate those. But if we are honest, there is also another side, isn't there? If we are honest there is also brokenness, disappointment, doubt and silence from God. Sometimes when I talk about such things well-meaning folks will say I'm too serious.....or that's too dark....as if Christian faith should be some escape, and we all wear happy masks. I don't think it's too “heavy.” Rather, I think it's being honest; honest about life, and honest about faith. And I believe when we dare to be honest....when we wrestle with hard words.....we discover a deep wisdom in our faith....and become real with God, our friends, and ourselves.

Psalm 13 is one of the laments in the book of Psalms. Interestingly, this is the most common type of Psalm. Evidently the ancient writers and singers of the Psalms also believed it was important to be honest about faith and life. Psalm13 honestly raises questions regarding suffering, fear, anxiety and the apparent absence of God. It speaks to the honest cries of our hearts in the most difficult of times. It brings together our hard experiences in life, the silence of God.....and the glimmer of hope.

II. Text

Read Psalm 13, and/or sing it via insert in bulletin.

III. Exegesis

“How long, O Lord, how long?” “How long will you forget me?” “How long will you hide from me?” “How long must I bear this pain in my soul.....this sorrow in my heart?” “How long will evil and enemies exalt over me?” “How long?” “How long?” It is not so much a question that seeks a reasoned answer, as it is a question that cries out in protest; “life is in chaos and you, God, are absent.” It is the fear in the middle of the night.....the gnawing feeling throughout the day.....the exhaustion as we try to get through our everyday lives. The Psalm gives us words in the most difficult of times. It invites us to pray from our hearts when God seems absent.....when all we hear is the echo of our own voices. “How long, O Lord, how long?” To live honestly, and to cling to faith seriously, is to raise the question.

This prayer confesses the real troubles in life. There is trouble with God because as life falls apart the person feels alone....without God. There is trouble within the person’s heart.....fear, brokenness and pain.....the free-flowing feel of joy, peace and confidence is gone. And there is trouble with something or someone outside.....a source of chaos and pain that has disrupted the person’s life. We do not know what the particular problem was for the person who wrote the Psalm. But because of that we can “fill in the blank”, and this prayer can become our prayer too.

At its very core this Psalm believes that the life of the person matters to God. God is not some impersonal force who does not care. God is not a powerless second-rate deity whose “hands are tied.” Rather the power and love of the Creator is greater than any power of darkness and chaos. The Psalm cries out in the dark that this God of power and love is “my God,” a personal claim of trust. The prayer makes this claim of trust because in personal experience and community experience the person has come to know God personally. In our experiences with God through baptism, communion, worship, beauty, prayer and study.....when we worship together and pray “Our Father, who art in heaven” we too become grounded in the same belief; that the God of creation is also “my God.” Believe that each of our lives matter to God.

The prayer ends, surprisingly perhaps, with a statement of trust and praise. The trust is a confidence in God’s steadfast love. The praise is the hope of God’s coming salvation; the activity of God in the person’s life. The trust and praise in the end are not about a specific answer, but the radical faith that somehow God will help me get through this darkness....that God will not remain absent....hidden...silent.

Long ago, when backpacking and camping, I noticed the strange power of a campfire. As dusk falls and weary backpackers look into the night, start a fire and spirits pick up. People sit around it, poke it with sticks, throw more wood on it, talk to each other, smile and laugh. In the growing darkness the light and warmth of the fire is a sign of hope and life. Even as people tire, the time grows late and darkness falls, there is the urge to keep the embers glowing.....light in the dark. The final words of Psalm 13 are like that....words of trust and praise; embers that glow in the night.....the dim light of hope in the dark. The Psalm does not let that light go out.

IV. Reflection

This Psalm of lament dares to put together the hard words and honest faith of some seasons in our lives; protest, petition and praise.....the cry in the night, the urgent plea for help, and a quiet word of trust. This is not the faith that is taken out and “dusted off” on Sunday mornings. This is not the faith that is an escape to “fantasy island.” This is not the faith of the illusion that we are in control of our lives. This is the faith of “well worn working clothes.” This is the faith of the “naked heart.” This is the faith for people who want to be part of the mission statement on the front of our bulletin: “Real people.....committed to Jesus Christ....living the Great Commandment.” It is the prayer for real people when life seems to stop and night is closing in.

This past Tuesday morning I went to Case Elementary with some friends in the Sharon Rotary Club, and we passed out dictionaries to all the third grade classes there. Other Rotarians passed out dictionaries to all the other 3rd grade classes in town. Before we passed out the dictionaries in each class, I asked the kids, “What do you do if you’re reading, and you come upon a word you don’t know....a word that you don’t know what it means?” Hands shot up with answers, “I sound it out,” “I use the context to try to figure it out,” “I look at the pictures,” “I ask the teacher,” and one boy honestly said “I just ignore it.” We then handed out the dictionaries, and talked about how dictionaries help us learn and understand the words we do not know. The kids were excited, and immediately began looking through their own dictionaries.

This Psalm is like that. We may have the words for praise and worship. We may have the words for thanksgiving. We certainly have the words to pray for our needs and the needs of others. But what about those other times.....those dark nights of life and soul when God seems absent.....when a cry comes from down deep “How long, O Lord? How Long?” This prayer gives us those words.....words we may not know. And without them we understand less, live with less, and believe with less.

Finally, this prayer reminds us who we are when we pray; mortals who stand on earth speaking to the Creator God who is ours, but never owned. In his commentary on

the Psalms, James Mays, one of my retired Old Testament professors from seminary, writes this about this Psalm:

“In this prayer agony and adoration are hung together by a cry for life. That is the truth about us people of faith. As the elect of God, we are not one but two. We are simultaneously the anxious, fearful, dying, historical person who cannot find God where we want God to be, and the elect with a second history, a salvation history, a life hid with Christ in God. ‘How long, Lord?’ we lament into empty space. We also say with courage and hope ‘You have dealt bountifully with me.’ (Ps. 13:6)” (Mays, Psalms, p. 80)

In this Psalm we pray with one foot firmly planted in the limits and chaos and anxiety of this created world.....and with the other we dare to take a tentative step of a great hope, trusting in the steadfast love of God. Such a prayer could not be more honest.