"WHEN LIFE IS FAITH"
Psalm 124; Mark 9:38-50; James 5:13-2
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World Communion Sunday
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"If the Lord had not been on our side." These words from Psalm 124 at first troubled me, because I could not shake the idea that such a statement was nothing but pure unadulterated ego. These words immediately bring to mind our own political climate in which the Lord's favor is thrown around as people testify to the validity of their stance on abortion rights, who should be allowed to marry, issues of war and peace, and even immigration rights. For some politicians and religious leaders, it seems that an announcement noting that a stance is rooted in having found God's favor is simply a way of insulating their beliefs from criticism because, after all, who is going to argue with God? And so this cynic decided I would not use the Psalm text this week.

Our lesson from the book of James includes the concluding words to the church in Jerusalem. In this passage, meant to give the people of the fledgling church strength at a time when they needed encouragement, James speaks clearly of the need to turn things over to God and to trust that God will respond. As I read this passage I noted, however, that the passage seems more than a little flippant: "Are any among us suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? Sing praises." Hang on, be like Elijah. Can you make it to three and one-half years? Do you have one more prayer in you?

Now I realize these sentiments are exactly what the early church needed to hear as this small sect of people were facing a constant barrage of opposition against their beliefs. But the advice from James seems way too simply, and thus I found myself frustrated and ready to throw this text away too. The church is going through hard times and all James can does is suggest prayer, singing, and waiting it out? Didn't the need more than that? I do actually believe in the power of prayer, and I am sure that we cannot celebrate the gifts of God completely enough. But again, the cynic spoke as I read this text, and so I decided I could not use it either.

And then there is the gospel reading from Mark that has Jesus talking of removing that which would allow you to sin: a hand or foot or eye. If any of those body parts would lead you to sin, just sever it from the body and remove it so that you can be whole with God, even if your body is not whole. Now let me see: I personally have spoken ill of how many people? I personally have used my hands to build up how many walls for dividing the world into those I would let in and those I would rather exclude? My own foot has been used to kick how many people and step over them so that I could run faster toward the things that are "mine?" All right then, this passage is out too. And so it goes, I think, as we read through the Bible always ready to say, "that piece doesn't apply to me, that chapter makes me uncomfortable, that piece offends me." Soon we become like Thomas Jefferson, cutting up the Bible into pieces to construct a book we believe is perfect. But as we do so, as we go about constructing a Bible will not offend nor disquiet anyone; we also end up creating a book that doesn't have any substance. Chop, cut, edit; and soon there is nothing left.

On this World Communion Sunday we have difficult texts which, I believe, is good news. Because as we gather this day to feast at Christ's table, we do so in a relative comfort that is not necessarily known everywhere else. We celebrate our faith in a warm building, among friends and church family, with local bread and our proper traditions; and our holy feast ***is*** a celebration of God's presence and God's grace. As we partake of the bread and cup, we celebrate and recognize that although there are vast differences in the languages, liturgies, hymns and worship locations where communion is being shared today, that ultimately we are united in the body and blood of Christ. On this day our differences are set aside as we recognize and celebrate that together all Christians are united at Christ's table.

As I looked for a way into the scripture lessons, and thought of Christian unity on this World Communion Sunday, I began to think about the liberation theology movement that was spawned largely out of the Roman Catholic church in Latin America. From a Liberation Theology perspective, the opening words of our Psalm are not words of privilege and political one-upmanship; they are words of survival, words of hope, and words that speak to the liberating power of God, even in the darkest of hours. Liberation Theology is a term that is often thrown around in theological circles, but some or many of you may not be familiar with it. At its core, liberation theology is a movement that seeks to respond to the needs and the well-being of the poor and underprivileged because it sees that as the critical exercise of the church. Robert McAfee Brown, in a key liberation theology text entitled "Liberation Theology" draws comparisons between dominant theology and liberation theology. He writes that, "dominant theology responds to the non-believer, while liberation theology responds to the non-persons of society." He also notes that while dominant theology is written "largely by the winners, those with white hands, liberation theology is only beginning to be written and must be articulated by those with work-scared and gnarled hands, by those who are often classified as the losers." Gustavo Gutierrez and the martyred Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero are early and prominent voices of Liberation theology.

Oscar Romero once said "What good are the beautiful highways and airports, all the beautiful skyscrapers, if they are fashioned out of the clotted blood of the poor who will never enjoy them." This statement is indicative of the passionate and practical questions asked by liberation theologians and as we look at our texts, I would like to see them as best I can through the lens of liberation theology.

In this framework then, we can more easily hear the Psalmist–not as a modern-day political leader but, instead, as the savior of Israel and in contemporary times as the savior of all people. Rather than imbuing these words with my own biases I can look at these words and recognize that Israel was giving thanks for their mere existence and for God's providence. The Psalmist is essentially saying, "If God weren't on our side, surely we would have perished on the banks of the sea; surely we would have starved; surely we would have been defeated somewhere along the line; instead, we have escaped all of it <u>with God's help</u>. And, likewise, a similar reading from the poor of our world: Surely we would have starved to death; surely we would have frozen to death; but somehow we have escaped death so far and thus, the Lord must be on <u>our</u> side. Let me be clear: This isn't saying that everything is hunky-dory; but what this reading does is help us see that even amidst the struggle, there is God–serving as a liberating force, mitigating that which would bring destruction if not for God's presence. Where I was sure the Psalmist was writing out of ego, a liberation perspective instead points to a grateful people, which liberates not only the people but our text as well!

The reading from the letter from James is also changed by a liberation perspective. In reading James, I first identified his words as trite or flippant. But what I was missing is the power and strength that he was promising as a result of trusting in God. James refers to the prophet Elijah as a way of reminding the early followers of Jesus that patience is required and that God neither forgets nor abandons God's people. From a liberation perspective, I can imagine this passage being read as a way of reminding folks that although they feel powerless and alone, God has not forgotten them any more than God forgot about Elijah. God's time *is* God's time, and merely because justice does not come about on our time schedule does not mean that it is not coming at all. James writes, "The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective." This is a cue to those who feel that they have been forgotten or forsaken to remember that God is still in their midst; even if their place is hidden and forgotten about by the rest of the world or even by the church.

Finally, there is the gospel lesson, with its over-the-top declarations concerning how to handle one's own sinful impulses. In the midst of my dismissal of this passage, I skipped over what I think is one of the most important messages in the entire Bible. In trying to dissuade the disciples from drawing distinctions between those who follow him, Jesus says "Whoever is not against us is for us." This statement is easy to miss in the midst of the metaphors concerning severed hands and lost eyes. But I would argue that it is here that we should focus in this lesson, especially from a liberation perspective. Jesus meant this statement to inspire the disciples to understand that they alone were not the purveyors of the kingdom of God. This was a moment for the disciples to check their egos at the door and recognize that the message of Jesus would not and should not be held by a select few. From a liberation theology perspective, this passage brings unique insight because it provides a message of hope in the midst of cultural battles that seek to demonize or hold down the poor, the under-educated, minority populations of all sorts, children, and just about anyone who hasn't already found his or her way to the top of the power structure. This statement is a statement of unity between all who would work for justice and all who are in need of it for themselves. "Whoever is not against us is for us" reminds us that there are broad coalitions to be tapped and that the gospel provides an inclusive invitation, rather than an exclusive one. Perhaps as Christians we should borrow these words:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed, to me:
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

I know they are from a plaque on the Statue of Liberty, but I believe that they are a faith statement–for this nation and for all people. The gospel reminds us that we can and should be receiving the tired and the poor, the homeless and the wretched, and that we should live in a way that proclaims liberation for all. The message of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that liberation is for all of us; in Christ we are no longer sinners, no longer lost sheep, no longer the wretched of the Earth. Instead we are liberated to live in the fullness of Christ's love simply as we are. On this World Communion Sunday, as we take the bread and share the cup, may this feast be unlike any other. May it be one that fills and sustains us, and one that opens our eyes to the liberating power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God, Amen.