

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious loving God, a new day is upon us. We find new possibilities to turn to you and let your life and love flow through us. Here we come to your house to be inspired, to be convicted with your Word of Life, to reconnect to the source that allows life to have meaning. Gracious God, we come to sow seeds of goodness and love in order to reap faithfulness in the future. Holy God, we often fall short of your great standards, but that is the joy of grace. Help our lives of gracefulness translate to lives that serve one another out of that bounty. In our love, in our service, in our devotion and faithful action in your name, we find that there is water that fills us when our lives feel dry and stale. When we get into a rut, let us remember you and reorient ourselves to your ways. We are mindful of this as we lift up our prayers to you, Gracious God. So many of our brothers and sisters around the world find themselves struggling against misdirected hatred and great fear. Some find themselves in the crosshairs of never-ending conflict and war. Some we will never know struggle with not even having enough to eat. Gracious God, there is so much we cannot solve, but what we can do, let us do with all our might. Let us serve those who need a sign of your love here in Cheyenne, the state of Wyoming, and into your greater creation. Let our willingness and our giving be a sign of our love for you and for your work in this world. We pray these things in the name of the one who gave his life for us but lives among us still, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray...

SERMON

One of my greatest struggles in seminary was just before my third year. I had decided to take two summer classes. Now, summer classes aren't like regular classes; you pack 10 weeks' worth of work into two weeks of intensive classes. You are in class for

about three hours a day and then go home to do at least that amount of reading per night. “Intensive” definitely is the right word; you have to immerse yourselves in the subject. So, I chose two classes that I was greatly interested in. Each one, by themselves, would be enough to handle, but having them back-to-back was a bit of a problem. Those two classes were Religious Violence and Death and Dying. Don’t get me wrong; I am grateful that I took these classes; they were two of the most interesting and most indispensable to my ministry formation. But, by the last part of Death and Dying, I was irritable, I was moody, I was not clinically depressed but had a very low attitude. I was immersed in just the negativity of each of these subjects that it took their toll on my well-being. After all, each day was filled with death, violence, and struggle to which there are no good and easy answers. So, when those classes were over, I unplugged. I took a vacation back to Nebraska. I was so surrounded by all these things that took me to the negative side of the world that I had to reorient toward the part of life that gives me energy. I had to reorient myself toward God’s calling through support, action, and perspective, as I lost sight of the calling in the midst of darkness. This was an extreme example, but it is something we all must do consistently.

Let’s face it, sometimes life isn’t so grand. Sometimes you have health problems; sometimes the world around you seems like it’s against you. Sometimes your friends are there; sometimes they feel far off and unsupportive. Sometimes we frankly just go to a selfish place. Sometimes we make the little things seem really big. Anyway it is, sometimes life just feels dry. We automatically want to appeal to God to fix it. Turning to God is the right thing to do, but faithfulness is more than just an appeal. Living in God’s ways is more than a prayer; it’s a way of life. God doesn’t make us feel good; God empowers us towards life with meaning and purpose. When life seems dry, the message of Psalm 85 is a good

place to start. This spoke to a community that had many, many more issues than anything we face today, but the advice it gives draws us back to what's important, the best way to connect with our Creator. Let's look at this Psalm, understand how it is written, what it asks of us, and how it can be a remedy when life seems dry.

Psalm 85 is not a glowing, happy psalm. It gets down in the dirt and talks about the rough stuff. This is a lamentation, a means of expressing anger, hurt, and frustration. At the same time, it is an appeal to God for support, for strength, for reviving. It falls in the tradition and form of the prophets' writings: speaking of judgment but, ultimately, hope when the people return to God. We don't necessarily speak of lamentations this day in age, but they are integral to a healthy life. When things are really tough, I mean really tough, it is unhealthy to keep everything in. We cause more harm to ourselves than good when we do. Lamentations are structured ways of expressing pain, which invites healing. In this particular lamentation, there are three main parts, according to the New Interpreter's Commentary, which one can easily see if you turn to the psalm. Verses 1-3 remember the great works God has done in the past to the people as a remembrance. God has been faithful. Verses 4-7 are the main section of the lament, calling for God's mercy in the midst of so much pain, although the psalm does not say what the trouble is. Things are just not going well. Pain and judgment endure. Verses 8 and 9 assures that God does save, and the final four verses are God's response to the people's cry. We complete the cycle, going from the past joyfulness, the difficulty of the moment, and the promise of a better future.

But all this is rooted in one main theme in the Old Testament: covenant. Covenants are like contracts, but they are much more joyful than a dry contract. It's not something you enter into with regret or begrudgingly. While they are serious and binding, one does

not feel sadly bound by covenant but lives into its promise as something you want to do. God does not make contracts with humanity but makes covenants that promise God's support with the people's allegiance to God. Some are conditional, with humanity required to hold up their end of the deal or suffer the consequences. Other covenants are unconditional. God made covenants with Adam and Eve, with Abraham, with David, with Moses, and so many more. When the Old Testament speaks to God to turn away anger and judgment, it is because they have not lived up to their end of the covenant and wish to return to fidelity. That is how they saw the exile to Babylon. That is how they saw the Roman Occupation: a failure on their end to live up to God's covenant with them. But, as the podcast Sermon Brainwave mentions, God's judgment is not as powerful as God's fidelity to God's people and the covenant. What this Psalm calls for is a return to the ideals of covenant; the people must return to faithfulness to God. Perspective has been lost.

It's similar but not exactly the same for us today. We observe the final covenant as our cornerstone as the church. We observe the last covenant God made through the person of Jesus Christ, and that covenant was unconditional. In other words, we do not need to keep a long list of laws intact in order to live up to the terms of the covenant. Christ's grace is free and open. Nevertheless, we recognize it is not a cheap grace, a grace that claims God's promises without responsibility. We must live differently in response to that grace, otherwise grace becomes meaningless to us and everyone around us. Ultimately the idea is the same: a faithful response to the covenant of God is joyful response in word and service, and this psalm outlines the idea. But what does that mean to us today? It is a way of life.

As we said, there are four parts of the Psalm, but we can faithfully split them into two halves. The first half is the supplication to God, the call for help. The second part is the

response, which we shall look at more. “Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.”

First, in the Psalm and in life, we have to “hear what God the LORD will speak.” When we do that, we can better accomplish the second part, to “turn to him in their hearts.” Here, we have the image of “those who turn to him in their hearts.” It sounds apparent, but it’s a much deeper image than we might think. We have an automatic idea of our “heart” as the source of emotion but, more scientifically, how our blood gets pumped throughout our bodies. In scripture, “heart” as it is translated into English has a completely different idea attached to it. It is not the organ that pumps blood. It is more accurately described as something much more deep and not quite so clear. Other ways we could translate that is “spirit,” “mind,” or “soul,” according to the New Interpreter’s Commentary. If it were to have a place in the body, it would be more in the gut than in the chest. To the Ancient Hebrews, that’s where the soul resided. It has more to do with your deep-seeded self. We might see a bit of that when we talk about “gut feelings.” It’s where the truth is. It’s where we are our true selves, where we make our decisions and where we ultimately connect with our Creator. Turning to God “in our hearts” means an absolute commitment because it comes from our very essence. It is truly giving God our all, from the root of ourselves throughout our whole bodies and beyond.

Are we willing to make that kind of a commitment? It’s beyond profound; it’s giving everything and more. But when we truly turn to God in our hearts, then the last stanza shows the results. “Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other. Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.” These, of course, are not literal; they are profoundly poetic. These

things described, though, are not listed by accident. They are signs of the covenant and the fruitfulness that comes from fidelity to God's covenant. When we are fully in-tune with God in our hearts, in our very being, then great things happen. It is our work and God's work connecting, and the world benefits. As the timeless passage of 1 Corinthians 12 tells us, we are the Body of Christ. We are the hands and feet of Christ, the ones who do Christ's work in the world. When we are faithful to God, when we are connecting with God, when we turn to God in our hearts, then the signs are apparent. Love, righteousness, faithfulness, peace spring from our words and our actions. Our neighbors benefit; the world benefits because we are connected with God, not with any other agenda.

There's a great saying that applies to everything in life, something that is being said here. You reap what you sow. You get out of life what you put into it. If we invest yourself in, as the Psalm says, "turning to (God) in your heart," then love will abound for God and God's people. If we invest in negativity, negativity will pervade our lives. Everything will seem like a problem because we make everything a problem. When God is the focus, everything falls into place. Life isn't always clean and happy, but meaning abounds. We begin to see everyone around us as God sees them: blessed, a little broken, and always worthwhile. When negativity is the focus, everything is out of whack. Everyone is annoying. Everything is inconvenient. Nothing ever goes right; every little thing is a problem. Investing in the right things is the first place to start. We reap what we sow, and when we sow faithfulness in our hearts, faithfulness will abound throughout our lives. Sure, we can lose sight momentarily as I talked about, but we can always find our way back.

When life seems dry, it's probably because we have lost sight of what we are investing in. Perhaps it is because our view of the covenant of today has disappeared.

Jesus is more about what we want than the one we can serve. Tunnel vision happens with our benefit in mind, and we've lost perspective. Either way, we are human, and that will show throughout our lives. No matter how faithful we seek to be, life will be dry sometimes. We can lose sight of things when we are surrounded by darkness. When we grieve, we can't just shut that off. When there is tragedy and pain, it is not a sign of a lack of faith or investment. Sometimes we are completely in-tune with God, and life feels like a well-oiled machine. Other times, we trip over ourselves, nothing seems like it is following a beat, and God feels far away. Throughout it all, there are times of plenty, and there are times of dryness. What we might need is a change of perspective, to truly turn to God in our hearts and plant the right seeds, to reap faithfulness in times of good and bad. Thanks be to God for this wonderful but difficult challenge! Amen and Amen.