

Lord, Have Mercy
First Sunday in Lent
February 22, 2015
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Text: Psalm 25

Introduction to Psalm 25

We will hear Psalm 25 this morning through cantoring and response, and I just want to say a bit about the structure and content of the Psalm. We will be hearing the first 10 verses of Psalm 25, but the entire Psalm is 22 verses long and it is an acrostic of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet – each verse starting with successive letters: ALEPH, BEYT, GIMMEL, DALETH in Hebrew. And so using that poetic device, the Psalm is more a collection of phrases around a theme than it is a narrative or theological thesis. And carrying the poetic device further yet, the first letters of the first and middle (v.11) and last verses of the Psalm together form the Hebrew word for LEARN – pointing to the Psalm is an individual prayer of one who seeks to learn the ways of the LORD.

“Lord, have mercy” – that’s supposed to have a bit of a Southern twang to it ☺ - ideally a southern Baptist woman... I can hear it in my mind, said in that way – in surprise or disapproval or indignation or exasperation – but whether you’re a southern Baptist woman or not, it’s a phrase in our vernacular...but what does it mean? - “Lord, have mercy” - just a throw away expression?

“Kyrie eleison” – Greek for “Lord, have mercy”; that has been sung and said in Christian worship for centuries – present in the earliest church liturgies – and, something like it has been a part of faithful worship for centuries before – Psalm 25:6

be mindful of your mercy, O LORD... ...which is the poetic equivalent of “Lord, have mercy”. In this very personal Psalm, used for corporate worship, comes an appeal to God’s mercy – we join in a refrain that comes through the millennia – so what does it mean to give voice to that petition, if something more than just a throw away expression...?

Well I want to listen further to the Psalm about the ‘why’ and ‘what’ of “Lord, have mercy”, but I think a first way into that is to touch on another part of our liturgy. An often used

response in prayers is to say “Lord, in your mercy; hear our prayer” – it’s again a form that goes back centuries through Christian worship and into the Psalms – “hear our prayer” “Lord, give ear to my cry” ... but have you ever thought about why that is said? do we really have to ask God to hear, to listen to our prayers? is whether God listens or not dependent on our bargaining? on our qualifying? or on our polish? – the most eloquent prayer wins?! No, God hears regardless of a person’s resume or rhetoric, but perhaps it is not so bad to ask anyway. And what I mean by that, is there can be a sense of assumption or presumption or entitlement that slips into the modern, Protestant, progressive sort of faith that I personally find quite meaningful to espouse: ‘God listens and forgives and loves and saves – I’m all set – so, thanks be to God, I suppose, but good for me, too!’ – how’s that for a modern statement of faith?!

I think what “Lord, have mercy”, “hear our prayer”, reflect in our liturgy is something of our Hebrew heritage – something of a more Hebrew, Jewish sensibility in addressing and interacting with God. The fabric of such faith has woven into it some strands of bargaining and reminding with God, some hues of persistence and insistence to God (you might recall some of the stories of Moses speaking to God, reminding God of the history and promises of God with and to Israel – cajoling and convincing God to continue in faithfulness). And I think the reason for those stories and prayers that have been collected into the faith and worship of God’s people, what the liturgies of appealing to and seeking for God give to us, is that we as a community of faith need again and again to get our bearings...about God, and ourselves, and our world – about who is who and what is what in our lives and world. I think it is as simple and profound as ‘who is it who has what we truly need?...Lord, our Lord, only God’s mercy meets what our circumstances require: Lord, have mercy.’ ‘who can we turn to? who is the One we can speak our lives to? who can we trust?...the Lord, our Lord, God’s heart alone is the place to entrust our prayers: ‘in your mercy, Lord, hear our prayer.’ It is a way of orienting, centering our faith in who God is and who we are; so let’s keep listening to this Hebrew fabric of faith:

Psalm 25:6 be mindful of your mercy, O LORD,...and of your steadfast love

Now this is a very interesting combination of Hebrew words. When I see “mercy” in the Psalm, I think of the Hebrew word GHESED, a word frequently used in the Old Testament; but in this verse GHESED is actually the word that is translated ‘steadfast love’ which this NRSV translation often does; and the word here for mercy is RAGH-A-MEEM, which is often also translated as ‘compassion’. And in addition to the renderings of ‘steadfast love, mercy, and compassion’, these words are also translated as ‘kindness, pity, faithfulness and goodness’. And if that isn’t enough, when GHESED and RAGH-A-MEEM are paired together, here as in several other places, what they allude to together is another central Hebrew word and concept: BEREET/covenant. There is this covenant, relationship, agreement between God and...God’s people; all people; all creation (the parties involved vary). And what this covenant says is: “This is who God is: the God of ‘steadfast love, mercy, and compassion’...and since those words don’t fully suffice...the God revealed in ‘kindness, pity, faithfulness and goodness’. In the midst of everything, these words express the heart of who this covenant God is. So, scripture is all the time reminding God about that, about who God is...and so do we: “Lord, have mercy”. Interesting thing, though – this God of RAGH-A-MEEM and GHESED, mercy and steadfast love...well, the reminding goes both ways: ‘this is who you are, my people; you are made to live in mercy and steadfast love, in compassion and faithfulness.’ The very act of reaching out to God – Lord, have mercy - brings us into a covenant that calls and renews us in who God makes us to be.

So let me try to say very simply, personally, kind of like a Psalm, how I find that playing out in my life. “Lord, have mercy” has started to become a prayer that more often passes through my heart and breath, day to day, moment to moment...and I wonder, as I pray it, what do I mean? I think I mean this...

...in my own life, as I need direction and wisdom and run into deadends, as I know my own brokenness and pettiness and imperfection, as I seek strength and patience and purpose – where do I turn? well, not to myself - I need a God, my God, of compassion and mercy, to touch in me what needs mending, and to turn me to love and mercy in who I am – ‘Lord, have mercy’.

...when I see someone in need, near or not, and I feel sometimes the capacity to help and at other times an utter inadequacy to do anything at all; well – Lord, have mercy: I commend any help I can give to God’s faithfulness; and in so much that is beyond me, I will still entrust that person to God – I will keep hope for those who cannot, and know myself called to keep trying – ‘Lord, have mercy’.

...when this world spins around, and I start to believe the refrain that politics and progress, that war and violence, that science and theology, that torture and terror, that service and success – that human ingenuity or infamy will prove the decisive power of our day...

No, no, no, no, no...I, we, need to hear a different refrain: “Lord, have mercy” – God is the One to whom we must turn: in God alone is the mercy and steadfast love, the compassion and kindness that is the hope of the world; and it is only the Spirit of God creating those paths in us that is our hope.

As the artistic reflection says about the blue hue of our environment today: ‘can we make more room in ourselves for the deep blue of God’s covenant mercy, and then offer it to each other? that sapphire place where God walks and we are called to accompany God’s mercy-filled ways.’ Sisters and brothers, at this table, we have something to say to God, and in the petition is the answer: “Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy”. AMEN.