

Journeying to the cross...in Sabbath
Lent 2C; Psalm 27:1-14, Philippians 3:17-4:1

GOD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?
YHWH is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?
When evildoers assail me to consume my flesh—they'll stumble and fall...
One thing I asked of GOD...and that one thing I will seek after:

- to live in GOD's house all the days of my life,
- to see the beauty...the sweetness and delightfulness of YHWH,
- and to seek GOD's temple.

This Psalm is a beautiful and powerful declaration of faith; it is a declaration of absolute trust in One God. The Psalmist's petition is singular, his purpose crystal clear: the only thing he asks is to live in God's house where he can see God's beauty, and where he is free to seek God's temple, God's otherness, God's sanctuary. The Psalmist knows that trouble will come...times of trouble are the nature of life...and he knows that when trouble comes, he will need to see God's face. In the face of difficulty, he knows that he will need to keep his eyes fixed on God's beauty. And there, in the beauty and sweetness of God, there all will be well. In fact, just the thought of God's face being hidden from him causes him distress. But if he can see God's face, when he is looking at the beauty of YHWH, then no matter what, he will be safe, he will be saved in the sanctuary of God.

That's an amazing faith. In fact, at least for me, this kind of trust in God seems like an unachievable ideal. Or a strategy to escape life's realities. If we're looking at God's face, keeping our eyes fixed on the beauty of YHWH, then who will look at the world we live in? What about seeing the violence and brokenness? What about seeing the poverty and oppression and injustices? The systemic racism and brazen bigotry? We have to look at these things, no?

When we listen to Paul writing to the church in Philippi, he sounds a lot like the Psalmist. He opens this letter, “I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you...” He ends the letter, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” His letter is filled with words of hope and encouragement, directing the Philippians to turn their eyes to Christ Jesus. And...he’s writing from prison. This man who was once persecuting Christians is now being persecuted for keeping his eyes on Christ. Yet within walls of confinement he is fully alive in Christ. Here he is experiencing the light and salvation of God, God as the stronghold of his life. These walls cannot obstruct his view of God’s face, of God’s beauty and delight.

I can barely imagine such trust.

In the Journey program our last unit was on Anabaptist history and theology. When we talked about the early Anabaptists being martyred for their faith, we were simply amazed. We shook our heads in wonder. How was it possible for them to keep praying, to keep praising God, even as they were being burned? I would have expected that seeing friends and family being killed would have been a deterrent for others. But it wasn’t. Instead, their trust grew. The community of faith grew stronger. The face of God was compelling, sweet, life-giving.

In more recent history, when white Christians lynched black men and women, as their bodies were being cut and burned, they could be heard singing hymns and praying. Beholding the beauty of God, seeing God’s face, these victims found sanctuary that even this vile hatred couldn’t touch.

A note: I am not saying nor do I mean to imply that suffering is redemptive. It isn’t.

Singing hymns, praying, and rejoicing, even in times of trouble is surely what Paul is calling the Philippians to when he says, “join in imitating me.” From prison, Paul keeps his

gaze fixed on Christ, imitating Christ, being saved and transformed by God's love and mercy and forgivingness. He hasn't always kept the beauty of God in front of him, but confronted with the light of Christ, Paul saw the beauty and sweetness of the face of Christ, beauty that is now filling him, transforming him, empowering him with love and mercy. And he can't help but invite, plead with these new Christians to do the same. Listen to v 17, with a (better?) translation, "Be reborn as imitators with me, and so mark those who walk in the way of the example you have in us."ⁱ

"Be reborn as imitators with me." Paul knows that it is hard for human beings to see the light of Christ. There are so many distractions and obstructions that it is hard to keep our eyes focused on the face of God. Paul names this difficulty, "For many behave as enemies of the cross.... Their end is destruction; their god is the belly/desire; and their glory is in their shame; they think on earthly things. But our citizenship exists in heaven, and it is from there that we are eagerly waiting for a Savior.... He will transform the body of our lowliness that it may be conformed to the body of Christ's glory...."

At first hearing, it sounds like Paul is devaluing the body and earth and elevating heaven. However, that is not the message to receive from these words! God loves earth and creation, including human beings. God created us with our bodies and declared us good, beautiful. And when we watch Jesus, we see him loving human beings...human beings in their very human bodies.

So what is Paul saying?! "Be reborn as imitators with me. Many live/behave as enemies of the cross of Christ...their god is the belly/desire."

What does it mean to keep our gaze focused on God? What does it mean to live as a friend of the cross? (I'm using the "face of God" and the "cross" interchangeably.) What does it mean to live as an enemy of the cross? Sometimes when we talk about these things

we use the vocabulary of ethics and morality. But doing so surely reduces and legalizes the Christian life to a right ethic, a right set of morals. So, in an attempt to capture the dynamic aliveness of following Jesus, I'm going to use the language of economics.ⁱⁱ

What does it mean to live as a friend of the cross? The capital of the cross is love, self-giving love. The economy of the cross is a gift economy. Love and mercy, grace and forgiveness are given as gifts. They can't be purchased, or earned, borrowed or deserved. They're already ours. They are already everybody's. And they are distributed in generous, abundant, even gratuitous measures. In God's economy, there are no assets to protect, no risks to be concerned about, nothing to be afraid of. Anyone can be a shareholder. In fact, everyone is a shareholder...we've only to claim our shares! In the economy of the cross, stocks never lose their value, and the market never crashes. It's a stable, secure economy. The Living God is always pouring love into it. God who is love is always generating more capital—more grace and mercy and beauty and forgivingness than we know what to do with!

When we live as enemies of the cross, we participate in an economy of the belly, an economy of desire. This is an economy of scarcity. Its currency is fear. We invest in this economy, expecting dividends that will satisfy personal self-interests, dividends that will keep us safe and secure, investing in assurances that nothing bad should ever happen to us, dividends that will pay out what is rightfully ours, what we're entitled to get. In the economy of desire, there is never enough. When this is the currency that's making our living, we fear not having enough, not being enough, not knowing enough, not doing enough. In the economics of scarcity, competition and rivalry thrive. Others become threats to our well-being. This economy sees the world through eyes of scarcity and problems. And like everything else in this economy, hope and solutions are scarce.

The currency of the cross is love, generosity, gift. Its dividends are transformation, freedom of being and freedom of expression, and sanctuary in the very heart of God. As Jesus journeyed to the cross, he freely exchanged in the currency of love, lavishly giving and receiving gifts. He wasn't selling insurance or solutions to personal or societal problems. He saw and named brokenness, personal and communal brokenness. But instead of telling people how to fix their problems, he opened hearts and spaces for God's love to transform bodies and lives. He opened eyes to see the beauty of God's face. And when individuals saw the face of God, they saw their own reflections; they saw themselves as beloved daughters, beloved sons of God. Jesus told people new stories about themselves, and in doing so, he gifted them with hope, with new, life-saving and life-giving possibilities for their future.

In the economy of the belly, the economy of fear and scarcity and problems, the cross is interpreted as a solution—the cross fixes the problem of human sin. Except it doesn't. The cross as a fix-it solution didn't...and it still hasn't...fixed the problem of human violence. It hasn't shut down the economics of scarcity and fear and rivalry. Rather, the cross exposes human violence...and into that violence, God's gift economy flows.

The cross, instead of a solution, is an opening into hope, into a new future. When we watch Jesus on the cross, he's still indiscriminately handing out gifts of love and mercy and forgiveness. And the gifts are generous, gratuitous even. This is what God's economy looks like! We can be sure that Jesus is keeping his eyes fixed on the face of YHWH, trusting God's beauty, trusting God's aliveness and love, knowing that even as he is being killed, even then he is being sheltered by eternal and endless love, knowing that he will see the beauty of God in the land of the living.

Back to Paul's invitation to imitation. It may seem odd or uncomfortable for us to think about imitating someone or something, even if it is God's economy. Imitation doesn't

take thinking or understanding; it's rote. But the thing is, the economy of desire is so pervasive that we who want and intend to follow Jesus, without meaning to we find ourselves living as enemies of the cross. Everywhere we look, our eyes land on the economics of scarcity and fear and problems and unwittingly, unknowingly we find ourselves imitating the economy of desire.

That's why we imitate God's economy. We simply practice, every day, every moment, exchanging gifts of love and mercy, generous and abundant gifts of grace and beauty. We see the brokenness of the world around us, not as problems to be fixed, but as hearts and spaces for God's economy to flow, for God's gifts of love and mercy to be distributed, freely shared, generously exchanged.

And so, as we journey to the cross, let us imitate God's economy. As we are "marching in the light of God," let us practice generous and abundant gifting. May we keep our eyes fixed on God's face, on the beauty and sweetness that is God.

ⁱ Paul Nuechterlein in his lectionary commentary.

ⁱⁱ Peter Block's, *Community, the Structure of Belonging*, inspired this conversation of economy.