January 15, 2017

Psalm 17:1-7, 15
Rev. Charles M. Wood

Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

**Psalm 17 (NRSV)**

**A Prayer of David.**

1Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry;
    **give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit.**
2From you let my vindication come;
    **let your eyes see the right.**

3If you try my heart, if you visit me by night,
**if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me;
    my mouth does not transgress.**4As for what others do, by the word of your lips
    I have avoided the ways of the violent.
5**My steps have held fast to your paths;
    my feet have not slipped.**

6I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God;
    **incline your ear to me, hear my words.**
7Wondrously show your steadfast love,
    O savior of those who seek refuge
    from their adversaries at your right hand. . . .

15**As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness;
    when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.**

We’ve just read together a portion of Psalm 17. By tradition, this was a prayer of David when he was on the run from King Saul. Apparently he was on the run for about seven years, all told, so we have a number of other psalms along similar lines. The part of the psalm that we didn’t read, in between verses 7 and 15, basically asks for protection and deliverance; the sung response accompanying this selection in the hymnal comes from that part: “keep me as the apple of your eye, hide me in the shadow of your wings.”

But we were occupied mainly with the first part of the prayer, in which the pray-er of the prayer seems to be trying to convince God—or maybe to convince himself—that he deserves protection and deliverance. “Hear a just cause, O Lord; attend to my cry; give ear to my prayer from lips free of deceit.”And so we found ourselves saying: “if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress. . . . My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped.”

Now, if you were attending to what you were saying, you may have experienced a momentary hesitation about joining in on those affirmations; you may have had qualms. *I* am free of deceit; you will find no wickedness in *me*; *my* feet have not slipped. Hmm. An early Christian writer (Eusebius) suggested that the only person in history who could honestly pray this psalm was Jesus. As for the rest of us, it may not be a bad thing if one effect of our reading these words together out loud in church is to experience a bit of discomfort, however major or minor.

There are some other psalms, and a number of other places in the Bible, much like this: where a prayer arising from a situation of distress begins with an affirmation of the pray-er’s own righteousness. Often this is the case when the person praying feels that he or she has been lied about or misrepresented, mistreated or unjustly accused. There’s a need to set the record straight, to speak up against a climate of deceit. Many of us have been in situations, more or less serious, when we have felt that need. Under those circumstances, there’s something right about making the sort of self-affirmation we hear in this psalm; whether or not God needs to hear it, it needs to be said.

But there is a danger here, of course, especially if the feelings expressed in this sort of psalm become a settled disposition. The danger lies in our coming to adopt a view of reality that relies on a sharp contrast between innocent, righteous me (or innocent, righteous us) and guilty, horrible them. We can then expend an incredible amount of energy shoring up our image of our own rightness, generally by taking every opportunity to point out others’ wrongness. Our rightness and their wrongness require each other; it’s a dangerous and destructive pattern, a dangerous and destructive way of life—for an individual, or a nation, or a culture. That’s why it is a good thing if, when we speak those words of that psalm, we have some misgivings; a good thing if we are not quite sure of the fit.

In a few weeks we will be observing the five hundredth anniversary of the event that marks the beginning of the Protestant Reformation: Martin Luther’s posting on the town bulletin board in Wittenberg, where he taught, of a long list of points he was willing to maintain against what he saw as errors and abuses in the church of his time. At the heart of Luther’s understanding of the Christian message was a trust and confidence in the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ, an unearned love that does not require us to prove our own rightness, but that becomes the basis for a new way of life.

This trust is closer to the spirit of many other psalms, which appeal not to our own righteousness but rather to the steadfast love of God as the ground of our hope. There is a clear continuity between the vision of these psalms and the gospel on which Martin Luther relied. We don’t need to justify ourselves, and so we don’t need to insist on our being in the right. We don’t need to find an “other” onto whom to project all that is wrong. We can admit our own mistakes, look more honestly at ourselves, accept forgiveness—and deal more honestly and patiently and graciously with others. Christ offers us a life different from one trapped in self-justification. In the words of a contemporary reaffirmation of Luther’s insights—an affirmation worked out by Lutheran and Roman Catholic representatives over several long years, and signed officially on behalf of their churches in 1999, with Methodists and other Christian bodies endorsing it in the years following—“By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.”

We are told that one way that Luther used to remind himself of this fact—and he needed reminding at times, when he was feeling overwhelmed or things were not going well—was to say to himself, “I am baptized.” *Baptizatus sum*. Not, “I was baptized” once upon a time, but “I am baptized”: baptism is a present reality in which we live, a reality symbolized by that sacramental act involving some water. Putting a different spin on that word “baptize,” the reality symbolized is the reality of being immersed in the love and life of God. Immersed. Drenched. Inundated. Swept along.

This small meal we are about to share symbolizes in a different way the new relationship with God and one another into which we have been brought. Our lives have a new context—or perhaps we have just discovered the context that has been there all along. In any case, let us receive this gift with thanks. Amen.