

Psalm 26: 1-11a "Clean Hands" Rev. Janet Chapman 10/3/21

In the book "Becoming A Contagious Christian," there is a story told about a newly promoted colonel who had moved into a makeshift office during the Gulf War. He was just getting unpacked when out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a private coming his way with a toolbox. Wanting to seem important, he picked up his phone saying, "Yes, General Schwarzkopf, I think that's an excellent plan. You've got my support on it. Thanks for checking with me. Let's touch base again soon, Norm. Talk to you later." He then turns to the private, and asks, "So what can I do for you, son?" The private replied rather sheepishly, "Ahhh, I'm just here to hook up your phone." That general probably never read Psalm 26 with its emphasis on integrity and authenticity, but at the same time both point to some prideful behaviors.

According to the greatest Old Testament scholar of our day, Walter Brueggeman, the author of Psalm 26 is not somebody you would probably want as your next door neighbor or coworker or family member. Just listen to some of the words, "Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity..." Seriously, are we really asking God to turn the tables on our enemies because of our "integrity," our trusting without wavering? Is this author truly praising exclusive segregation of the worthless, the hypocrites, the evildoers and the wicked? Christians of all stripes have loudly and consistently insisted that God justifies us in spite of our sins. God doesn't look at us and decide that we are better than others, and grant us the reward we think we deserve. I can testify that in my own experience those who proclaim the loudest about their own holiness are actually hinting that something is seriously wrong spiritually speaking. Just when I am most sure of my own righteousness, that is when I am probably the most blind to my own misdoings. Who actually prays this psalm? Psalm 26 is the prayer of the successful and the righteous. It is the prayer of the one for whom things have worked out right. I wanted to be captain of the team and I worked for it, and I got it. I wanted to get into an Ivy League school so I studied and I got it. I wanted that person for my spouse so it is done. You have heard this prayer before when Jesus tells the story about two men who went to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself, careful not to be defiled by those wretched sinners and prayed, "God, I thank thee that I am not like other people, embezzlers, drug takers, adulterers, blasphemers, heavy drinkers and all those other

things the Bible describes which we're not sure of what they mean but that sound bad. And I am especially glad I'm not like that tax collector for I fast twice a week and give tithes on all that I get. I thank thee for me." The Psalmist's prayer has become an inventory of his virtues – Integrity? Check. Trust? Check. Faithfulness? Check. Innocence? Check. Chastity? Oh well. In many ways, the Pharisee is talking more to himself than to God. Like Jackie Mason once said, "I like talking to myself because I like dealing with a better class of people." is a cool, calm, calculating religion which touts God's words, "Obey my laws and all will go well for you." It is a prayer for bright, sunny, Sunday mornings with all of us here in dresses, suits and ties, hair tastefully styled, outfits accessorized to the max. We are God's cherished ones who gather weekly to go over the contractual terms of our fixed relationship with God, checking each other to be sure we are still right with God, that our social attitudes are suitably progressive, that our hands are clean. Not too long after Hurricane Katrina, this prayer was preached in a church in New Orleans that suffered little damage when the levees broke. Without question, the members had felt as though they were the innocents, and literally did not get swept away by God. But what was the message to those churches in the Ninth Ward that were swept away, or closer to home, what is the message to the Lutheran and Methodist churches that were recently burned in the Dixie Fire? When tragedy demolishes houses of worship of the rural, less affluent, and living on the margins, what right does a relatively unscathed church have to wash its hands in innocence?

If you don't hear the hint of sarcasm, then I'm not being clear enough. Who prays this Psalm? We do, when we are young and have the world at our feet, when our barns are full, and the vineyards are productive. When all is going well, as long as we don't mess up, as long as the sun and the rains come on time, and our star is in the right quadrant, and our hands are clean, we pray this psalm. Multiple times, the words "I," "me," and "my" are used which essentially places God on the outside of the divine-human relationship. You don't need God for a religion where you are as good as God. Those who use this Psalm to build themselves up are the kind of people who study the idea of the Trinity, looking for a vacancy. Brueggeman says this is the dominant characteristic of many churches on the American scene -a kind of dignified atheism. The Latin origination of the word "a-theism" literally means "without God," so religion

becomes a-theistic when it no longer needs God to make it work. I am the measure of all things around me. COVID is relevant only as it pertains to me and my right to choose. My nation is worth killing for, because it is an extension of my god - me. You don't need God to pray this Psalm.

So what do we do with a Psalm that calls for one's own vindication, that claims to be the holiest one around? This became a question Augustine of Hippo wrestled with in the late fourth and early fifth century in North Africa. Augustine sought to redirect Christians away from an inventory of virtues list and more toward the holiness of Christ. He himself had virtues he was not proud of. Therefore, his faith grew out of a stance based on a forgiving and loving God who inspired those who left God out of the equation to live more holistically in partnership with God. His history was so scarred that his enemies even questioned his worthiness to become a bishop, to which he responded, "You say I'm evil? Well, let me tell you just how evil I am." In Augustinian thought, the value of the Christian faith was not based on how many good people are produced but on how we have the most forgiving God. We cannot preach exclusion from the wicked and hating the company of evildoers when Jesus of Nazareth sat with them and ate with them. Jesus made the point that interaction with such could lead to the expansion of the realm of God as long as we kept focused on our covenant with God.

It is verse 7 that redeems this Psalm, bringing God back into the equation if you will. We gather at an altar to God around which we give praise and that altar is surrounded with folks of every nation, race, culture, language, and affiliation. One altar, not many altars, because there is one God who unites us all together, especially on days like today. At that one altar, verse 7 says we "tell all [God's] wondrous deeds!" Jason Byassee notes that to hear the sound of praise in worship is to understand deep within yourself that whatever evil there is in you as a result of sin belongs to you, and whatever good there is inside of you, setting to the right of those sins, belongs to God." The rest of the psalm must be read in this light: as praise not of our goodness, but of God's – God made us good placing that divine spark, that holiness deep inside of us as a part of our identity as God's children. In this light, we can begin to see how this psalm can be about worship. It is about gathering with those who are not worthless, for no child of God is worthless, and singing aloud a song of thanksgiving, telling God's wonderful deeds around us

and beyond. It is releasing our self-righteousness and naming the righteousness which God has given us. Amid our lovers' quarrels and outright fights in our denominations about what the church should or should not do, we have forgotten the importance and joy of letting our hair down, kicking off our shoes, and announcing with unrestrained joy, "O Lord, I love the places in which you dwell!" If there is anything that quarantine has taught us, it is that those places are not limited to buildings, but can be carried over wavelengths of all kinds, uniting us in the act of praise. Gathering at the Lord's table on World Communion Sunday is bigger than ever before because walls no longer divide us, denominations meld together as many different tables become one as God works through the gifts of technology. Clean hands will encircle our earth, not because of our doing, but because of God's, and our voices shall ring out as one, "O Lord, I love the place where your glory dwells." Thanks be to God, Amen.