

REFLECTION

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Psalm 86

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The Psalm Prayers have always been a comfort to me starting in my senior year in high school. When my father died suddenly I turned to Psalm 46 many times: "God is our refuge and strength a very present help in trouble." The Psalms seem to speak to the human condition of suffering, illness, betrayal, fears and disappointment but they also include rejoicing, thanksgiving, praise and joy.

Why do we pray? While surveys show that while many people will hesitate to call themselves religious a larger percentage will say they pray and believe in God or a Supreme Being. What is this Supreme Being -- a someone or something that we encounter in prayer, a sacred something that is yearning for relationship with us? It's a mystery and as the 14th Century Hindu poet, Lalla Ded said: "Will you ever understand how near God is to you?"

And the words of the African American spiritual:
Over my head, I hear music in the air
Over my head, I hear music in the air
There must be a God somewhere.

Many if not all of us hear the music, or have had some kind of experience of the sacred and the holy and can say "there must be a God somewhere". Could it be that our yearning for God is God's desire for us?

"If you long to connect with the Sacred, if you desire to live a life that is more in touch with the Holy, stop listening for something and start simply listening. These are the words of Pastor and author Erik Wikstrom: "Notice those places in your life where you have felt yourself in the presence of the Holy, remember those experiences in which you have heard your connectedness, see in your own life—your own feelings, your own moments—those places where you have encountered or are encountering, the Sacred. In other words, Simply pray. Pray without any preconceived notion of what you're doing or why. Simply do it and see what happens."

Today's Psalm 86 is a prayer for help. Let's look at selected verses and think about our own life experiences or situations where we long to connect to God or where our life circumstances bring us to our knees.

"Incline your ear, O Lord and answer me, for I am poor and needy. Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you; save your servant who trusts in you. You are my God: be gracious to me, O Lord, for to you do I cry all day long. "

I love the Psalms and turn to them often in prayer because they touch all our human emotions. Like the Psalmist, haven't we cried to God in our difficulties and struggles and asked God to bend an ear and answer our prayers? Franciscan Priest and author Richard Rohr says:

“The path of prayer and love and the path of suffering seem to be the two Great Paths of transformation. Suffering seems to get our attention; love and prayer seem to get our heart and our passion.” “True prayer, is usually experienced as tears, surrender or forgiveness.” Certainly the psalmist is suffering as he is crying out to God all day and I think many of us can identify with this at times.

Could our life journeys which lead us to face our core realities also lead us to our truest self and to God in prayer? We can come to know God in our brokenness as the psalmist says in another prayer: “God is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit” and in spite of our weaknesses, brokenness, and sinfulness, God is always loving, forgiving and compassionate.

In the midst of his suffering, the Psalmist mentions devotion to and trust in God. I find that trusting in my prayer life is easier if I let go and let God-- trusting in God’s mercy and grace rather than expecting a certain outcome. It is so hard for us human beings to let go of what we think we can control, and surrender trusting God with the outcome. Verses 6-10 In the Psalm is evident of this trust:

“Give ear, O Lord to my prayer; listen to my cry of supplication.
In the day of my trouble I call on you, for you will answer me.
There is none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like yours
All the nations you have made shall come and bow down before you, O Lord
and shall glorify your name.
For you are great and do wondrous things; you alone are God.”

Our suffering can be lifted somewhat when we practice gratitude and give thanks to God like the Psalmist for the many blessings in our lives in spite of our current struggles.

In Verse 16 we see a line that could have been the prayer of Hagar in the desert: “Turn to me and be gracious to me, give your strength to your servant; save the child of your serving girl.”

Hagar who in her life journey as a young mother was rejected, homeless, an outcast and alone in the desert when she cried to God to save her son and her prayer was answered. How often have I and many of you cried out to God for our children, and also for our friends, family, our world and ourselves? We all have to walk through the valley of the realities of life and death, pain and suffering, illness and old age, disappointment and failure but we don’t have to live in fear of it because

As the Psalmist says with confidence “You Lord have helped me and comforted me.” Yes, life is hard, our paths are never clear and the stakes are high, but we can take courage because we are not alone on this path. There are others on the path with us sharing our joys and our sorrows.

As a member of this church since 1976, I have sat in this sanctuary many years with others in prayer circles and vigils—this very sacred space where many Civil War soldiers were prayed and cared for in their suffering and what for some was their final hours.

In our life journey, we can be assured and grateful that God's grace, love and comfort are always there beside us remembering the words of Jesus: "I am with you always to the end of the age." And We can rejoice that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.