***NOT MY PRAYER***

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Texts: Psalm 26 and Mark 2:13-17

 There is perhaps no better loved book of the Bible than the Psalms. From the familiar words of the 23rd Psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” to the 100th Psalm’s encouragement to “make a joyful noise to the Lord” to the 121st Psalm so appropriate to this valley: “I lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence will my help come?” the psalmist speaks ***to*** us and many times ***for*** us in treasured verses. In times of joy and in times of sorrow and in every time in between men, women and children have found in the Psalms words to give voice to their pleas or their prayers or their praise. As the 4th century theologian and church father Athanasius writes:

*In the words of this book the whole human life…is comprehended and contained. Nothing to be found in human life is omitted.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Not to be outdone, Martin Luther contended the Psalter

*might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible.*[[2]](#endnote-2)

It has been called the church’s songbook and the church’s prayer book, or as Dietrich Bonhoeffer simply says:

*[The Psalter] is God’s Word and, with a few exceptions, the prayer of men as well.[[3]](#endnote-3)*

But if the psalter is all those wonderful things: songs and prayers and God’s Word for all people, then I must admit that as I read this 26th Psalm, I want to make a disclaimer: This is really not my prayer, and I wonder if it is not yours as well.

 It opens with this plea: “Vindicate me, O Lord!” but what the text really says is, “Judge me! Prove me, try me, test me!” Do you really want to ask God to judge you and test you, want it so much that you are willing to pray for it? I have often said that you shouldn’t pray for God to ***teach*** you patience; you should pray for God to ***give*** you patience, because the lessons necessary for God to ***teach*** you patience may be a whole lot tougher than you really want. I feel a little bit the same way about the psalmist’s plea. Do we really want to ask God to judge us and test us to see if we measure up to God’s expectations for us? God may be the ultimate judge and there is nothing to suggest that we will escape that judgment, but is there really good reason to urge God to start judging us now, or might we prefer to have a little more time to get our houses in order?

 The psalmist does not seem to want to wait; he seems anxious to have his case heard. Some calamity seems to be at hand, for he fears his life being swept away with sinners and the bloodthirsty, by those with evil plans and dishonest dealings. We can’t tell exactly what the peril is, but we can tell that the plea of the psalmist comes out of growing desperation. This is a plea, not for eternal judgment, but for divine deliverance from some foe. The psalmist sees the Lord alone as the source of rescue from his predicament in the hands of dirty rotten, no-good, very bad scoundrels.

 C. S. Lewis suggests that one of the distinctions between Old and New Testament court settings is that the Old Testament setting is typically a civil trial, while the New Testament setting is a criminal trial. In the Old Testament the judge is deciding between the claims of two different parties – deciding who is in the right between the two, not who is guilty or innocent. Thus the psalmist can plea for the divine judge to decide whether he is more righteous than the foes who are threatening him. He is confident he will fare well on that count as he presents his case:

 I have walked in integrity.

 I have trusted you without wavering, Lord.

 I have constantly been aware of your steadfast love.

 I have been faithful to you!

 I don’t hang out with the wrong crowd – with hypocrites, worthless idlers, criminals and rotten, no-good, very bad people.

 I go to church and sing your praise and tell everyone how wonderful you are, and by the way, I love your house, Lord!

Those are the credentials the psalmist lays out. If we thought they were true, we might be pretty impressed and expect God to be impressed as well. But – and it is a big BUT – his righteous plea smacks a little, or perhaps a lot, of self-righteousness. It sounds like the prayer of the Pharisee Jesus described in the parable we heard last week:

*I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income. I floss my teeth and I am very-religious! (That last part isn’t in the text but I think it is implied.)*

Jesus said the self-righteous Pharisee went home unjustified, while the tax collector who prayed: “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner!” went home in right relationship with God. Wouldn’t the psalmist have done better to pray the prayer of the tax collector rather than the Pharisee? But the psalmist’s prayer is more like the Pharisee’s prayer, so I don’t want it to be my prayer – or yours.

 As if that were not enough, the very people the psalmist proudly claims to have avoided – the dirty rotten scoundrels – are the very people with whom Jesus sits down to dinner. He even calls one of them to be his disciple and calls another out of a tree to have dinner with him. When the scribes question Jesus’ choice of dinner mates in words the psalmist might have uttered – “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” – Jesus responds that it is those very people for whom he has come. How can this prayer of the psalmist in any way, shape, or form, be our prayer?

 James Reston once said that “golf is a plague invented by Calvinistic Scots as a punishment for man's sins”. That pretty much describes my golf game. Perhaps that is why God’s name is invoked so often on the golf course. There is something essentially theological about golf, and it finds expression in the design of golf courses. American courses, for the most part, are designed with the belief that those who live right are rewarded. If you hit the ball straight down the middle you are rewarded with a nice lie on short grass. Live right, play right, and you are rewarded. But that is not how the game was originally conceived. The Scots know that life is not like that – it is not always fair. So on Scottish courses you can hit the ball down the middle and have it hit some knobby bump that sends it careening into the prickly gorse or some God-forsaken pot bunker. You can hit a perfect shot only to find a sudden gust of wind blowing it off course off the course. But you can also find some errant shot hitting another of those bumps and bounding back into a position far better than you deserved. The Scots know that life is not always fair, that playing the right way is not always rewarded, and part of the game is dealing with the frustration of undeserved suffering and unmerited blessing.

 The psalmist seems to be from the American school of golf design, believing that his righteous living should be rewarded. But the reality he encounters, as a kindred spirit with Job, is that sometimes even good people suffer. Sometimes righteous living is met, not with sweet-smelling roses, but with itchy poison ivy. Sometimes life is not fair, not because we are being punished for the errors of our ways, but simply because that is the way it is. We do the right thing, and still we suffer. To whom then do we turn?

 We turn to God as the psalmist did in that prayer that I don’t want to be my prayer. We turn to God, knowing that God understands something of unmerited suffering.The cross is a constant reminder that God does indeed understand – understands to a degree beyond any we have known or might imagine. We turn to God, not to rail against the unfairness of our plight; other psalms will voice those frustrations for us. We turn to God, asking for divine deliverance, pleading

 for help in getting back on our feet and

 for the strength to persevere and

 for assurance that we are not alone and

 for hope that we may survive the ordeal.

It does not really matter whether the foe we face has a human face or is some dire disease or some perilous predicament or some overwhelming set of circumstances. Against all those foes, it is God who is with us, God who continues to love us, God who promises that we need not fear or despair or give up. It is God to whom we turn, for with God all things are possible.

 We may not be as righteous as the psalmist – always walking with integrity, never wavering in our trust in the Lord, faithful day in and day out, ever grateful for God’s steadfast love. But perhaps we should aspire to be more that way – to walk with such integrity and faithfulness and trust in the Lord. If what the psalmist says about his own faith and faithfulness is true, then perhaps we should not be surprised that we who are less righteous might experience unjust suffering. When we do face a problem that is not of our own making, perhaps we might follow the example of the psalmist, not in declaring our own righteousness, but in turning to God for help while trying to walk with integrity, faith and faithfulness, not joining the scoundrels in scoundrelous activities, but trying to minister to them in love, as Jesus did. Perhaps this prayer of the psalmist might be a prayer we might hope to make one day – one no good, rotten, very bad day. Instead of griping about how unfair it all is, perhaps we might pray with the psalmist on that day: Lord, I am trying; I am really trying to live your way. Redeem me, be gracious to me, save me! Amen

1. Athanasius, *Ad Marcellinum*, quoted by James L. Mays*, Interpretation: Psalms*, John Knox Press: Louisville, 1994, p.1 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 35:254, quoted by James L. Mays*,* Id*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, p.44 quoted by James L. Mays, Id. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)