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February 4, 2024*

Bring It All

Psalm 147:1-11, 20c

Last week in the Midweek Musings I shared how our most recent confirmation class discussed the Bible and how many people, mentors and confirmands alike, admitted they do not do a lot of Bible reading. They are not alone. For many people, and I imagine many of you, the only Bible people connect with in a week is what we read aloud in church on Sunday. Which I completely understand.

The Bible can feel very overwhelming - it is a big book; and it can seem quite daunting with its ancient references and far-removed history. Where do you even start? So many people sit down, sometimes out of curiosity, other times out of a sense of Christian obligation, to read the Bible and they start at the beginning. Which makes sense - Julie Andrews told us the beginning is a very good place to start. And if you start with Genesis, you might make it through Genesis as its full of intrigue and the stories of families. It is easy to follow. You might even make it through Exodus. But only the dogged and determined will make it through the laws and lists of Leviticus before throwing up their hands and giving up.

But rather than feel pressure to read the whole thing, I would suggest it is better to start with things that will resonate and connect with you and your spiritual life. Which probably means not starting at the very beginning, and perhaps one of the best places to start is right in the middle - The Psalms. The book of Psalms is an excellent place to begin because it is full of poetry and songs which express all kinds of emotions to God. The Psalms make for great devotional and worship material because that is exactly what they are - they are the book people, starting as early as 1000 BCE, used for their worship. And even now, 2000 years later, the Psalms can make for excellent reading and really help us deepen our devotional and prayer life.

And I would like to tell you more about why I think the Psalms are worth your time to read and why I appreciate them so much, but to do that, I am going to ask that you stick with me, as I step back to a wider lens than the Bible for a minute before bringing it back to the Psalms.

Recently I was watching a TV show about a Muslim family. In this episode, the father of the family had died a month ago and the family is gathering for a prayer service and

reception in his memory. The mother, and wife, is setting up the table of food and is moving slowly, clearly grieving, when the imam, the religious leader, comes up to her and tells her that it is important for her not to grieve “too much” because it might impede the departing soul, her husband’s, journey to the afterlife. She looks at him and says, “I will try to find the right amount of grief.”

I thought to myself, “well at least it’s not just the Christians.” By which I mean, that in my role as pastor, I am often with people who are grieving and I have had the persistent experience that people often feel like there is such a thing as too much grief or not enough grief. Regularly people will make comments like, “I’ve got to stop crying” or “I don’t know why I’m not crying more.” When I plan a funeral with people, they often say they could not possibly speak because they might cry. Or sometimes people tell a funny story and then feel like it was inappropriate to laugh – that laughter does not belong with grief. Frequently people indicate that they feel like their emotions are all over the place – crying one moment, laughing the next, then feeling zoned out, then anxious about the future. And many people wonder if all these emotions are normal and worry that they may be “too much” or “not enough” for other people.

But honestly, I do not think this is unique to the experience of losing someone we love – this concern about being “too much” or “not enough.” Grief is just a time that includes some very public rituals where we find ourselves without much practice about how to be. So much of the rest of our lives we have learned how to control and compartmentalize our emotions with an eye on not being “too much” or “not enough.” We learn from an early age when to let our emotions out and to whom; how to tamp down our bigger feelings and ignore others altogether. Researcher and author Brene Brown did a survey of 7,000 people and discovered that most adults can only name 3 feelings they can identify feeling - happy, sad, and angry, which is really such a small portion of the feelings we have been created to experience.

God gave us happiness, sadness, and anger, but also grief, doubt, fear, curiosity, creativity, silliness, excitement, frustration, loneliness, shame, anxiety, awe, joy and so many others. But starting when we are young, we are told and we get a lot of non-verbal messages to check our emotions. Do not be “too” emotional, exuberant, loud, sad. We get the message that we should not make anyone else uncomfortable with our outsized emotions. So, we learn to bottle up, shut down, and hide the full extent of our emotions. But they do not just go away. When we do not allow the appropriate releases of our emotions, they will come out in other, often inappropriate, sometimes harmful, ways.

For example, psychologist, Esther Pearl says, “trauma is unwitnessed sorrow.” In other words, bad things happen to us and they certainly cause harm and pain, but trauma, the deeper, lasting pain, comes about when we allow our pain and suffering to go unwitnessed.

A study at Harvard, taken place over 60 years, looked at how people age happily and well, and found that one of the biggest effects on whether we feel satisfied with our lives is if we have someone to share our worries with. One of the biggest conclusions of the study is that you should not worry alone. We need to let other people in on our worries, our anxieties, our fears, our hopes.

And, Brene Brown says, “without understanding how our feelings, thoughts and behaviors work together, it is almost impossible to find our way back to ourselves and each other. When we do not understand how our emotions shape our thoughts and decisions, we become disembodied from our own experiences and disconnected from each other.” Which, if we do not even allow our emotions to be what they are, how could we ever understand how they shape us?

Which brings me back to the Psalms. The Psalms are an amazing example of people expressing the full range of human emotions. There are many Psalms based on offering praise and thanksgiving to God; recounting all that God has done and focusing on gratitude for God’s goodness and blessings. But the Psalms were written for people in exile - people who had lost everything - people who were navigating wars and loss - loss of loved ones, of land, of community. And so, there are also Psalms which express anger, doubt, fear, sadness, feelings of abandonment, grief, as well as feelings of wonder and joy and delight.

Take Psalm 3 which says, “O beloved, how numerous are my fears! They rise up within me whispering there is no help for you.” Or Psalm 5, “Give heed to my groaning. Listen to the sound of my cry.” Psalm 6, “I am tired of so many fears; I cry myself to sleep at night, while grief and feelings of guilt bedim my eyes with tears.” Psalm 22, “Why have you forsaken me, God? Why are you so far, abandoning me as I groan in misery? I cry by day but You do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.” And then Psalm 138, “I give you thanks, O God, with my whole heart; before all the people I sing your praise; I was humbled when I came to see that You dwell in me...my gratitude knows no bounds.” Psalm 139, “I praise You for You are to be revered and adored. Your mysteries fill me with wonder!” Psalm 33, “Bring justice to the people, O God, and strength on my behalf to stand firm against oppression. From all that is greedy and unjust, deliver me.”

This is just a small snippet of how the authors of the psalms had no qualms in expressing their emotions to God; of bringing the fullness of their hearts and laying them before

God. And these were prayers to be used for worship – individually and together. It was assumed that worshippers could share their deepest feelings in front of one another. These psalms acknowledge that we are not created as “frozen chosen” – we do not need to suppress or restrain ourselves when we are with God or each other. We do not need to pretend that everything is fine and like we have it all under control.

Now, of course, there are emotions that get so big or so pervasive that we may need to do more than just feel them. For example, if we find that our sadness or anxiety is consuming us; if we feel one emotion so much and for so long that it excludes our other emotions, it is probably a good idea to seek out people with some specific training to listen and offer support.

There is probably also an argument to be made that there are right places, people, and times where we can express the fullness of our emotions and there are likely times where if we let the full extent of different emotions show, there will be consequences that we will not like. Road rage or screaming at someone checking you out at a store, for example, may not be a good way to express one’s anger. Though it is probably also accurate to say that most examples of times when our anger is ill-proportioned to the event at hand is likely because we are suppressing it in other places where we do not feel we can let it out.

But I hope the book of Psalms can serve as great encouragement to us to think more about how we allow our emotions to be expressed and how we can be more open to hearing the emotions of others in their fullness. If you take the time to read through some of the Psalms, I hope it will invite you to make more room for people’s deepest feelings and get away from the worry that we will be “too much” or “not enough.” If we spend some time with the Psalms, perhaps we will feel encouraged to ask people “how are you?” and to really stick around to hear their real answer. Perhaps spending time with the Psalms will help us to begin rewriting the messages we have heard that our emotions were meant to be compartmentalized and controlled so much.

Ultimately, spending time in The Psalms encourages us to see all our emotions as a gift from God. To know our emotions are how we come to experience being human at the deepest level, and to feel reassured that God welcomes all our emotions.

Tonight, or sometime this week, when you have some time to pray, start by reading a few Psalms and take some time to think over your day and the different emotions you have felt. Consider how you can bring all those different emotions before God in your prayer - where do you need to let some emotions out so they can resolve? Which emotions do you need to give more attention? Which do you need to ask God for some help understanding better? What emotions do you need God’s help to express to other

people in your life? May the Psalms serve as a reminder that we join in a great tradition of people who worship a God that created us with lots of emotions for the purpose of feeling and expressing them. Amen.