

**Scarboro United Church
Calgary AB
J. Paul Mullen
May 10, 2009**

Read: Psalm 22, John 15: 1-8

“A God You Can Love”

For the United Church this is Christian Family Sunday and for much of the rest of society it is Mother's Day. Earlier in the week I was thinking that I might say something about how our awareness is increasing about how diverse families are, and how diverse motherhood is, and how our perception of God both alters and is challenged by that diversity.

As I stand here now I am not sure I have done that, as my reflection on Psalm 22 took me down a totally different path. Perhaps I have only been more indirect in arriving at about the same place.

The end of Psalm 22, which we read together this morning, is a hymn of praise and gratitude to God for being a constant, loving and inclusive mother to the children of Israel. As I looked at it I realized that it is not really possible to appreciate where this praise and gratitude are coming from unless you remember the beginning of the psalm. Unlike the 23rd Psalm, the 22nd Psalm is not likely one you are familiar with, certainly not one you would have committed to memory. Yet you probably know the first line, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

As you may recall these are some of the words Jesus spoke from the cross. In the stories in the gospels about his crucifixion and death they stand out as a reminder of the stark horror of that event. Jesus is not only rejected by humanity and abandoned by his closest friends, he is abandoned by God. We might temper that by saying he feels abandoned by God.

I still remember sitting in class at seminary as one of my professors addressed this Psalm. He pointed out that in synagogue worship in Jesus' day and down through the ages, the cantor would chant the first line of a psalm, the way we call out the number of a hymn, and the congregation would join in reciting the rest of the psalm. From this historical perspective the meaning of Jesus' words changes from a cry of despair to a call to worship.

From its beginning the Psalm contrasts, in a wonderful back-and-forth internal dialogue, our own experience of abandonment and forsakenness with God's ever-present protection, love and care. How is it that we can feel so forsaken when God loves us? And yet we can, yet we do.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me,
from the cry of my distress?

O my God, I cry out in the daytime, but you do not answer;
at night also, but I get no relief.

But you *are* the Holy One,
enthroned upon the praises of Israel.
 In you our ancestors trusted;
 they trusted, and you delivered them.
They called to you, and you rescued them.
 In you they put their trust,
 and you did not disappoint them.

But I am a worm, less than human,
 an object of derision, an outcast of the people.
All those who see me laugh me to scorn, (ever been there?)
they curl their lips and toss their heads, saying:
 'You trusted in God for deliverance.
 If God cares for you, let God rescue you!'
But you are the One who took me out of the womb.
You kept me safe on my mother's breast.
 On you have I depended from my birth.
 Even from my mother's womb,
 you have been my God.

Then there is different kind of transition – no more back and forth, but a stark description of the depths of despair. As Judy pointed out a short while ago, the descriptions of Jesus' experience on the cross seem to have been inspired by the imagery of forsakenness this psalmist gives us. Too many of us know this feeling of being cut off from the life of the community, especially those ridiculed, tormented, marginalized and victimized because of their gender, orientation, race or beliefs. Too many of us feel cut off from the life and love which flows from God. In this time of economic recession the desolation of deep loss is being experienced by even more. With the Psalmist we sing:

Do not be far from me, for trouble is close at hand,
 and there is no one to help me.
Many bulls encircle me, strong bulls of Bashan surround me.
 (or maybe it's the bears of the stock market)
They open wide their mouths at me,
 like a ravenous, roaring lion.
My life pours out like water,
 all my bones are out of joint
my heart has melted like wax within my breast
 my mouth is parched and dry,
my tongue clings to my palate
 I lie in the dust of death
Dogs surround me,
 the wicked hem me in on every side.
They bind my hands and my feet,
 I can count all my bones,
 while they stand staring, gloating over me.
They divide my garments among themselves,
 they cast lots for my clothing.

Anyone going through bankruptcy will know that experience of having everything divided up among creditors.

As the African American spiritualist sings, “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, a long way from home, a long, long way from home.”

I remember a time, years ago now, when I felt profoundly defeated. I felt I had failed as a minister and let down a congregation because I had confronted a controlling manipulator who was a better fighter than I was and he was dividing the congregation, marshalling his friends to have me removed. It looked like he was going to win. I don’t think I have ever felt so defeated and alone.

It was then that a song on the radio reminded me whose child I am, and a wise counsellor urged me to speak my truth which I did. When the vote was taken I was affirmed and my nemesis and his family left the church. A few months later one of the pillars of the church, a quiet, gentle and compassionate senior said to me, “It feels like you have given us our church back.” The gratitude I felt then I still feel now.

Psalmist doesn’t end his poem with despair either. There is another transition that is a bit of a plea bargain. Hear again:

Do not stand far off from me, O God.

You are my helper, come quickly to my rescue.

Deliver me from the sword,

my precious life from the mauling of dogs.

Save me from the lion’s mouth.

my afflicted soul from the horns of the wild cattle.

(Here is the bargain)

Then I will declare your Name to my people.

In the midst of the assembly I will praise you.

And then the Psalmist does exactly that, as we read together this morning. He shifts again, this time into a great song praising God’s inclusive care for the cut off, the poor, the marginalized, the distant. “The ends of the Earth” are remembered as are “all the families of the nations,” those who have died and those yet unborn.

Or as John has Jesus say, “When I am lifted up I will draw all people into myself.” The God of the Psalmist and the God of Jesus is not one who punishes sinners with bad times but one who can be counted on in bad times – even on a cross. This God is one eternally connected to us even when we feel the depths of despair.

This same inclusion of the cut off, marginalized and despairing appears in the imagery of our Gospel lesson today. A lesson that is so easily misinterpreted. When we think of God as a male, sitting in judgement, we tend to add anger to the image. The pruning of the grape vine may be seen as an act of violent rejection of the branches judged worthless.

This is not the message, however, that Jesus is trying to convey with this image. Pruning is necessary for the health and productivity of the vine – as much as every second day the vines are cut back. There is nothing hostile or angry about this, and yet those looking for a judgemental God can easily get stuck here. God is seen as a loving gardener, caring for grape vines. Imagine God the gardener as a woman and the story becomes more caring, more nurturing.

What Jesus is suggesting is that the vine sustains us and gives us our identity. We are not separate from the vine but rather one with it – one with Jesus, one with God, one with the fruit we produce, the fruit of the spirit. It is only when we become disconnected from the vine, our source of nurture, we will wither, our souls will shrivel and the fires of violence will carry us away. Please note that Jesus never says that it is God who will carry us into the fires, just that it will happen. I know this because I know that Jesus remembers Psalm 22.

He knows that withering will happen. He knows that when we are cut off from the nurture of the true vine, the vine made up of God, Christ, community and family, we lose our ability to endure the dry, dusty times. We crave only what others have, thinking that will make us happy. We chase after the lowest common denominator and become increasingly shallow. Violence becomes easier because we no longer feel connected to one another. When fathers kill their wives and daughters; when a child-mother abandons her newborn baby to die; when corporate greed overwhelms any remnant of communal responsibility; when governments opt for war and carry out acts of revenge; when hatred is fostered and groups are singled out as targets for rage; when we turn to alcohol and other drugs to replace the deep nurture of the holy spirit; when the rich laugh all the way to the bank and the poor are left without adequate health care, education and opportunity; when we build an economy that leaves the world polluted, the poor homeless and the mentally ill on the street – then we know we have a profoundly spiritual problem.

But that is not the end of the story. God is always looking to re-connect and there is always a way back. Seeing God as a nurturing, caring mother loving us into fulfillment can help us reconnect to our true family, our family of faith.

When I researched the Spiritual I mentioned earlier I found some words going back to the late 1800's that lift up the main way we can get reconnected with the source of our being and our nourishment.

“Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, then I get down on my knees and pray, I get down on my knees and pray.”

Amen