

21 September 2014

**More Than Words: Prayers of Honesty**  
Psalm 109:1-20

*Show music video "I Pray for You" by Jaron and the Long Road to Love. Then Lay Reader reads Psalm 109:1-20 from The Message.*

I was going to have you read that Psalm responsively this morning, but for some reason that one didn't get included in our hymnal. Go figure. Horrible, isn't it? What a nasty, vindictive prayer. And it's not the only one, either. Psalm 5 is pretty bad. Psalm 26. Psalm 137 ends with a blessing on anyone who bashes out Babylonian babies' brains. There are enough of these horrors that scholars even have an official name for them, "Psalms of Imprecation." That means prayers of cursing. So, what are we supposed to do with this stuff? For the past two weeks, I've been telling you that we need to broaden our definition of prayer – but do we need to broaden it this much? Do we need to include venomous, hateful, mean-spirited prayers?

Yes. We do.

To explain, let me return to the working definition of prayer we're using in this series: *prayer is communication in relationship*. I'm going to ask you to do some imagining with me. First, imagine the people you have relationships with, whom you love, enjoy spending time with, but whom you know you can't talk about certain subjects with. "Oh, Clarisse is great. You'll love her! Just . . . don't mention home-schooling, all right?" or "Greg's great. He'll do anything for a friend, but, um, it's best not to bring up Obamacare, if you get what I mean." The taboo subject might be anything – pesticides, yoga, collective bargaining, homosexuality, or the misuse of apostrophes – but the result is the same. Every subject that you just can't talk about becomes a relationship barrier; it places a limit on your relationship with that person. Even worse is when the problem is a matter of trust. We probably all know someone whom we really like but to whom we would never tell anything confidential. And again, to the extent that your communication with a person has limits, so too does your relationship with that person.

Now imagine someone else. Imagine the one or two people whom you trust the most, the people you go to when you have to unload. Who do you talk to when you've just had the worst day of school ever or when you don't think you can stand that back-stabbing co-worker one more minute? Who is the person who you know instinctively will listen without judging you or offering unsolicited advice, who will understand your feelings and share them up to a point but without egging you on and making you feel worse. Who are the people who you know will still love you no matter what unguarded statement you might make, who might say, "I hear you" or "That's terrible" or may say nothing at all, but who will never, ever get all prim and proper and say, "If you can't say something nice about someone . . ." or "Now, you don't really mean that!" or "You should think happy thoughts!" This person, this person is a treasure beyond value, right? And to the extent that you can say just *anything* to this person and know you haven't jeopardized your friendship, then this relation is deep and true.

So you probably see where this is going. If prayer is communication in relationship, then one measure of the depth of our relationship to God is how much of ourselves we're willing to share with God. Are there things you would never dream of admitting to God in prayer? Why? Are you afraid God will be shocked? Will no longer like you? Will tell you to think happy thoughts? You know, I don't think so. At any rate, the psalmists say *everything* to God. Look at Psalm 109 – “God, kill my enemy, leave his orphaned children begging on the streets, and set up a monument proclaiming his father's sins for all the world to see. And put his mother's sins up there, too.” Whatever the psalmists feel – no matter how mean and vicious – they just dump it on God.

We don't. We pray G-rated prayers in prim tones and prissy language, as if God were a starched-up maiden aunt who might look disapprovingly down her spectacles at us and then write us out of her will. We are so careful not to betray any anger, or really any unpleasant emotions, in our prayers, as if we didn't want God to know we ever had those thoughts. Think about that for a moment. How dense do we have to be to think we can hide something from God? God knows when you're angry with your neighbor, your co-worker, your spouse, so don't pretend. In fact, sometimes we're angry with God . . . and God knows that, too, so we might as well just say it. The psalmists do that, too. Earlier in the service, we read a little bit from the start of Psalm 89. That psalm starts out thanking God for the covenant with David, the promise that David's line would never end and that there would always be an anointed king in Jerusalem. In the last fifteen verses of Psalm 89, however, the psalmist says, basically, “But, hey God! – now Jerusalem's destroyed, the line of David has been cut off, and you, God, are a liar.” You ought to read the end of that psalm. But don't bother looking it up in the hymnal; the editors left that part out. Evidently we aren't supposed to talk like that to God.

Yes. We. Are.

Look, if prayer is about relationship, and if we actually want this relationship thing with God to grow and mature – as healthy relationships are *supposed* to – then we need to be honest. We need to tell God what we're thinking and feeling. We need to trust God at least as much as we trust that friend that we dump on. We need to trust God to hear what we say and to be smart enough to know how much we actually mean and to be caring enough that it doesn't matter.

Let me close with a story. As many of you know, last fall I spent several months doing Clinical Pastoral Education, which involved my serving as a part-time chaplain at St. Clare's hospital. Well, one day I dropped by a room in ICU to visit a new patient. I don't remember exactly what had put her in intensive care, but she was awake and alert and willing to talk. In fact, I'd barely gotten there before she launched into a diatribe against Muslims. They were taking over our country and they all supported terrorists and so on. She wrapped up by saying, “You know what we need? We need another Crusade, like in the Middle Ages, and just go over and kill them all!” Now, remember, I'm a caring, compassionate chaplain-sort, or at least trying to be while on duty. I had enough presence of mind that, even though I found her opinion repugnant, I chose not to argue theology with a patient in ICU. Pretty good, huh? In fact, I was so pleased with my restraint that I told my CPE group about it at our next meeting, describing how sensitive and pastoral care-y I had been not to get into an argument. One of the group members – Kate, I think – said, “She sounds really frightened. I wonder what she's frightened

of.” Oh. This woman wasn’t in that hospital bed obsessing about Muslims. She was scared because she was in ICU. She was scared because people in white coats were doing all sorts of tests she didn’t understand. She was afraid she might die. She was frightened for her family – what would they do without her? And I missed it. I heard every word she said, but I didn’t listen to her.

Here’s the good news: God’s a better listener than I am. When we pray, God hears – really hears. When we ask God to just blast that person we can’t stand, God hears. God hears our words, but God also hears our hearts – our motivations and doubts and fears and needs. We can speak to God in the language that we actually speak, without worrying what God thinks, because mostly what God thinks is just this: “I love you, you know.”

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God, here we are, just as we are. Full of all the feelings that make us so difficult. Partly, we’re angry.

Sometimes we’re angry at you. *Pause in silence.*

You let that person who was so full of promise die too young. You chose not to heal those people who trusted you. *Pause in silence.*

Sometimes we’re angry at others. *Pause in silence.*

That person who lied to me. That friend who betrayed me. That person who made promises to me. Those people who thought only of themselves. *Pause in silence.*

Sometimes we’re just mad. *Pause in silence.*

I’m mad about the state of the world. I’m mad at every leader who cares more about his power than the lives of children. I’m mad about religious intolerance, wherever it comes from. *Pause in silence.*

God, I wish sometimes you’d fix things right for once. But until then, I guess you’re still the best – the only - hope. Thanks for listening. Amen

*Final word: I love that song we started with. It’s hilarious. But here’s the weird thing: in a screwy way, it’s exactly right. We really are supposed to pray like that, when that’s how we feel. No, God is not going to drop a flower pot on the head of an ex-girlfriend just because someone prays for it. God has more sense than that. But God does want to hear it when that’s what we’re thinking, because God likes to be trusted. That’s the point.*