

Prayer and Justice

Psalm 71:1-6

1 Corinthians 13

2/3/19

The Corinthian chapter is one we often hear at weddings, understandably. We do hope that every marriage is based upon the deep, respectful, selfless, thinking the best of others love that Paul describes. But this message has a much broader application. This chapter is Paul's description of how relationships in the church are meant to function.

This is the kind of love we are to show to one another. "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth."

These are high standards for us to consider on a day when we install new officers. And again, remember, Paul isn't writing to just elders or deacons. He is writing to all the members of the church.

How can we hope to ever approach Paul's description of love? We certainly can't do it on our own. A part of the answer can be found in one of the questions the new officers will be asked. "Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?" Notice the link between prayer and service. Prayer is vital to service that is energetic, intelligent, imaginative, and loving.

Prayer as our intentional presence with God and God's intentional presence with us. Prayer connects us with the source of perfect love. In this presence we taste the incredible grace of God, that unbounded, unmerited acceptance we receive. In this presence we experience how relationships are supposed to work. In this presence, we encounter the Person who "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

In prayer we can encounter divine justice. This is not the small justice of humanity that thinks mercy is shortsighted or weak. And this is not the small justice of humanity that believes if we punish enough, we can obliterate human sinfulness. This is divine justice that sees us for what we are and embraces our brokenness and makes it possible for us to change. This is the justice of relationship that changes hearts and changes the world. This is the loving justice of the cross.

Justice is something we all crave. Every child speaks it. "That's not fair!" And it remains for adults. Psalm 71 is a lament. A lament is a cry for justice. The psalmist is surrounded by enemies, even those who would take his life. The psalmist has tried to do God's will and yet things haven't gone well. We can understand this prayer. Most of us have faced this kind of situation. We did what we believed God wanted us to do and yet we were persecuted. Like the child, we cry out, "That's not fair!"

Certainly, in prayer, we can find the strength to face our enemies. Certainly, we can gain answers to the kinds of lament of Psalm 71. But there is more. The more time we spend in prayer, the more we begin to see the world with God's eyes. And that will break our hard hearts in the best of ways. We begin to see the need for justice beyond our own pain or the pain of those we love. We begin to see the laments and the suffering of others. We come closer to the divine justice.

And this helps us learn love. When our vision for the suffering of those in the world begins to widen, we grow more patient, we grow more kind. We become less envious and less willing to boast about our accomplishments, less rude to others, less proud. Our way becomes just one way and other ways are also welcome. We find life's challenges irritate us less. We resent others less. We begin to desire what is truly right, a right that considers not just our needs or the needs of those life, but the just needs of all of God's children we encounter. When God breaks our hard hearts in prayer and opens our eyes to the suffering of others, we learn more of that divine justice and we learn to love with a little more of the deep love of God.

The psalmist speaks of this beyond the verses read today. Listen to verses 14 to 16.

“But I will hope continually, and will praise you yet more and more.

My mouth will tell of your righteous acts, of your deeds of salvation all day long, though their number is past my knowledge.

I will come praising the mighty deeds of the Lord God,

I will praise your righteousness, yours alone.”

The great acts of justice, the movements that have turned our world upside have been empowered by this kind of prayer and this kind of justice. The deep love of God has stirred human hearts to care beyond the human barriers we are so quick to erect.

That divine justice that flows from the deep love of God can also transform churches. Let us draw near to God and let our hearts be changed. May God break any hardness of heart we have and give us a thirst for righteousness that seeks the good in one another's life and in the life of our community. May God teach us each day a little more about this amazing divine love so that others recognize it in our lives. Let us pray, and in our prayers, let us learn God's justice and grow in God's love. Amen.