

## WHAT WOULD JESUS PRAY?

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Text: Psalm 1; John 17:6-19

This past Tuesday morning I watched in dismay as a friend was driven away in a police car – under arrest. For theft. The amount wasn't huge. But she had a criminal history that I didn't know about. And – given that history – I suspect the system won't go easy on her. My friend is probably going to jail. Her life totally blown apart.

As I watched the police car pull away, I was flooded with emotion – anger, sorrow, outrage and, yes, righteous indignation. When the emotional cauldron began to simmer down – as it did because I told myself I still had to write a sermon this week – I couldn't stop thinking about my friend. She was present to me in the words of Psalm 1. Parts of it were used in our Call to Worship this morning, but listen to it in its entirety.

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers;

but [happy are those whose] delight is in the law of the Lord, [those] who meditate on it....

They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither....

The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

I don't think I'll ever hear this Psalm again without thinking of my friend. Before last Tuesday, I couldn't relate to this Psalm. It had nothing to do with me and my life.. I saw it as bleak, judgmental. Cut and dry, black and white.

But that image of the police car driving away came back when I reread it this time. “[T]he Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” I couldn't clear my thought so I vowed that I would share my insights in struggling with this Psalm in light of my experience.

The first thing that struck me was that contrast between the “righteous” and “wicked.” Most of us – and I include myself in this – would not count ourselves among the righteous. We wouldn't

stand before God and be found blameless. Nor would the congregation find us blameless if we were held up to the standard of the 10 Commandments.

Many of us have done things that aren't right or legal. I'll admit to it. I've talked on my cell phone while driving. I've parked illegally. I've also lied, I've coveted, I've taken the name of the Lord in vain on occasion. And I could admit to a lot more ... but I won't on the grounds that I might incriminate myself. So I certainly can't number myself among the righteous, by any stretch of the imagination if righteousness is defined in strictly legal terms. I doubt if any of us could, if we were judged by a judge without mercy.

After digging deeper into Psalm 1, though, I discovered that "the righteous" referred to there are specifically defined as those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path of sinners or sit in the seat of those who scoff at the law. "The law" here is also closer to what we'd call the "will of God," as in "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

And God's will has been encapsulated in that perfect tweet that Pastor Henry talked about last week: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself." That stream of exactly 140 characters is the summary of all laws. It's the thing that Jesus taught was the law from which all our actions should flow and by which all our actions would be judged. In other words, it's the metaphorical stream by which the righteous are planted and in which they are nourished.

The image of trees planted by streams of water takes me back to Slumber Falls Camp in New Braunfels, Texas – the UCC church camp that I grew up attending. There, Mexican juniper trees wrap their roots around giant boulders to get them into the waters of the Guadalupe River. So when the river floods their trunks are actually submerged, but they stand tall and strong against the flood because of their clinging to those rocks. And when there is a drought and the river shrinks to a trickle, those roots reach down into the damp river bed so that those trees do not perish. By inference, then, the righteous are those who escape trouble, those who survive even in trying times because of where they're planted and how they get their nourishment.

By that definition I could claim righteousness. If righteousness is a process, a struggle, to keep rooted and keep drawing sustenance from the stream of wisdom and guidance summed up in loving God and neighbor, then most everyone can find a spot in that category. The Bible is full of stories of questionable characters who call upon God and are miraculously saved. I suspect many of you have such stories.

The Psalmist contrasts those who are sustained by their delight in the law of the Lord with those who are wicked. The wicked are like chaff and are easily blown away. Chaff is that light outer hull of a seed like wheat. Chaff blows away when the wheat seeds are tossed up in the air. Chaff has no roots.

When I saw my friend being driven away in a police car there was part of me that wanted breathe a sigh of relief and walk away thankful that she hadn't hurt me. I could easily slap her with the label "wicked" and be done with her. Let her be blown away like chaff. But I read the Psalm

again and saw that it says, “The Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.”

That contrast between the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked still haunted me. I guess you could say I had some guilt about seeing her as chaff. I couldn't in good conscience forget that – while I'm preparing to enjoy the bounty of summer and celebrate our daughter graduating from college – my friend's young daughter will be asking where her mommy has gone, why she wasn't coming home.

In the tradition of the Psalms I cried out to God and argued that there must be another way of looking at this than the cut and dried way implied in Psalm 1. And, maybe there's a hint of good news in that she got caught before she could do more harm to herself and others.

As I struggled with these concerns, my spiritual buddy, Jeff, reminded me that Psalm 1 doesn't stand alone. It is in dialogue with the rest of the Psalms and with the rest of the revelation of God's action that we read about in the Bible.

So I turned to the gospel reading for this week from John. There we find Jesus praying. This passage is part of a longer prayer that Jesus shared with his disciples before he was arrested. Listen again for what Jesus prays for those he will leave behind:

”I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; .... I am asking on their behalf; ... protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, ... I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one....

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth. (*From John 17: 6-19*)

There it is again. There's a hint of my friend's story showing up in the Gospel, too. Jesus commends the disciples to God and says that – as long as he has been their teacher – he has not lost one who was given to him ... *except the one who was destined to be lost*. And we know who that was. Judas.

Was Judas destined to play the wicked villain? To be lost? To become chaff, blown away by the wind? I don't really believe that God would force someone to be wicked, do you? This singling Judas out to be lost is especially troubling in that it removes Judas' humanity and his freedom of choice.

I believe Judas exercised choice in taking action to betray Jesus. And Judas wasn't the only one who betrayed Jesus. So did Peter and the other disciples. Judas may have sold out Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, but Peter and the rest of the disciples denied him in so many ways – in their words and in their actions. But Judas does get lost. And why is that?

Once Judas kissed Jesus to tip off those soldiers – he gave up. He ceased to see himself as a disciple, as one who belonged to the word. And shortly after that he gave up on life. In one version of the story we hear that Judas hanged himself in remorse. In another version he bought a field and while working it he burst open in a spectacular aneurysm and spilled his guts in the field.

It may have proven expedient to say that Judas was destined to be lost – because in the end he was. He was the one who did the dirtiest of deeds and he paid the price. But the scriptures over and over again give us this assurance, that even when we turn and betray God, God doesn't give up on us. It shows up in any number of places in the Bible. While that assurance may not be plainly articulated in Psalm 1, we hear it in other Psalms– like the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. There we're assured that goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives. As Christians we cling to this assurance – that God's goodness and mercy pursue us and protect us in the form of the ultimate good shepherd, Jesus.

And in John's gospel we hear it again. Jesus praying for the disciples, that God protect them, even when Jesus isn't able to do it personally. That God watch over their way and keep them from evil. That even when they gave in to the evils, God would not stop watching and pursuing.

If Jesus were here with us he would pray the same way for us today. That God be with us, even as we go through difficult times when the world hates us and takes away everything we think we need to survive.

There it is .. And it applies to everyone. Even if my friend is convicted of the crimes she is accused of committing, I must pray for her as Jesus prayed for his friends. I must never give up on her. I must extend the love of God to her and visit her in prison and encourage her roots to grow deeper. Yes, that's it. I have to remind her of the truth – that she's a precious tree in God's garden and not chaff.

Yes, we must pray for one another, shed tears for one another, but never stop holding one another up to God. For no matter what happens, we all might be like trees planted by the water.

Amen.