

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
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It seems a natural human reaction to, when we encounter difficult times, our hearts and minds intentionally recall memories of easier or more joyful times. Something within our being seems to crave remembering and possibly reliving the lightness or joy of a former time and to count on those memories to ease the heaviness of the present situation. I think this is particularly true when we are consumed with grief. I watched four young women do just this while their beloved grandmother lay in the hospital bed, nearing the end of her life. For several weeks, each day brought a new collection of photos of happy times together with her, with countless stories to accompany them, until the room was plastered with collages which retold their life with Helen. Music played throughout their visits: songs they remembered singing or dancing along to with their grandmother, and I could see the smiles grow from deep within to extend across their faces. At first, I thought they were doing all of this to convince their grandmother to keep on living, but then I realized they were doing this to ease the pain of realizing that she would soon die. I shared this experience with them while I cared for my uncle after his brain injury. For 13 years, when the demands and struggles of meeting his needs became overbearing, I would remember the joy we shared when he was his more whole self. Stories from my childhood or remembrances of the meaningful times he had spent with my boys were propelled into my awareness, and the joy of those memories reconnected me with the deep love I felt for him, giving me the strength to drive, once again, two and a half hours to visit a man who seemed nearly unrecognizable to me most of the time.

Rarely, however, when life is good, prosperous, or fruitful and relationships are whole and life-giving, do we remember the times when this was not case. The admonition not to dwell in the past instructs us to leave the past there, where some would say it belongs, for we can believe looking backwards into pain or our wilderness periods of life prohibits us from embracing the fullness of the new life that Jesus' resurrection offers us. If we do glance backwards, it is often to remind ourselves of how far we have come through our own effort, more of a patting ourselves on the back than intentionally bringing the harder memories into residence with the happier ones.

However, our psalm today, or at least as it was sung in the ancient Jewish weekly and festive worship, invites us to do just this – to repeatedly lay upon our hearts the most unfaithful times in our past, to keep before us our painful brokenness, and to make the marriage of our memories of hardship, of times turning away from God and each other, with our experiences of joy, a common daily practice.

This psalm, which presents a divine oracle, with the psalmist speaking as from God admonishing the Israelites for their wandering from their God, was read every five days in temple worship and on the major festivals. Here, we have evidence that the ancient Jews incorporated into their regular worship a reminder that they had dramatically strayed from the covenant God

made with them. They always kept their past unfaithfulness before them, as part of their daily heartbeat of prayer.

As odd as this may initially appear to us, this is actually not an unknown practice for us as Christians. Each Sunday, after our initial praise of God through our opening hymn, we are invited into prayer through the Collect of Purity, where we ask for God to cleanse us from our sinfulness which has kept us from being faithful servants of Christ throughout the week. We continue this thread of acknowledgment of our faults and our turning away through our Confession of Sin, and we even find this perspective laced within our Eucharistic prayers. As we retell our salvation story in our Eucharistic prayer, we say phrases like: “We turned against you and betrayed your trust; and we turned against one another”, “we violated your creation and abused one another” and in our Evening Prayer Collect, we say “give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, and then the odd phrase – “shield the joyous” and all for your love’s sake.

Our worship instructs us that even, and perhaps especially in, our most joyous times, in our deepest moments of our offering our great thanksgiving to God, while partaking in Holy Eucharist, when we are aware of the immediate presence of our redeemer, Christ, we are to remember that we have gone astray, for somehow it appears that the ancient Israelites and early Christians knew that this memory of unfaithfulness was important in directing us toward a renewed sense of faithfulness. Perhaps what they knew was that repeatedly knowing, claiming, and owning our own faults honestly before God can provide the catalyst for changed hearts and behavior, and that we need to offer that continually, as the heartbeat of our prayer.

Some say that the psalms serve as mirrors for our souls, for just as a one looks into a physical mirror to see one’s outward state, when we read a psalm, we can often discover our inner state. When we hear the psalm today, perhaps we can hear it as an invitation to more deeply examine when, where, and how have we been moving toward God, and when, where, and how have we been moving away from God.

If we never do this reflection, if we place spiritual blinders on our souls and never acknowledge when we, like the ancient Israelites, decided that we didn’t really need God, or needed God only when we wanted something, or that we turned away from God when we didn’t get the response we desired, or that we saw our relationship with God as a one-way street and we refused to listen, then we miss the invitation to grow in our covenantal relationship with God. Sometimes we need to remember what the absence felt like to desire or appreciate what we have with God now. Just as we can’t give praise for our redemption without acknowledging our sinfulness, or we can’t appreciate our joy without knowing our sorrow, or we can’t celebrate Jesus’ resurrection without entering into the pain of Good Friday, I believe we are called to somehow hold these two parts together, in tension and in marriage, to bring our complete selves to God for renewal, restoration, and resurrection each Sunday as we come forward for the Eucharist. As William Faulkner wrote, “The past is never dead. It is not even past.”

For when we open our spiritual eyes to the pain we may have caused God or others in the past, when we acknowledge when we've refused to hear God's voice and adequately respond, we can then move into a new era of hearing with our heart, for our heart will be emptied of that which blocks the voice of God from our lives.

God only asks of us one thing: to listen. Today in the psalm we hear the Shema proclaimed in anguish: "O that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways!".

God has set a table replete with an amazing and abundant feast before us and the distress of the psalmist tells us that God believes no one is hearing the invitation. The table will remain set, the feast will remain abundant and true, the invitation will be ongoing, but God laments, "Who will hear it?" for Israel has stopped listening. God grieves and, like a rejected lover, God's pain is evident in the anguish we hear. And perhaps God, like we, in our times of grief, remembers the better times, the times when our whole selves were more evident, when we were faithful and true and complete in our offering to God.

I believe there is a healthy and productive tension between holding our past transgressions against God and each other with living into the new life Christ offers us. Somehow we can't have one without the other. To find our place at God's table and to be fed abundantly, we merely need to offer it all to God, the faithfulness and unfaithfulness, the joy and the sorrow, the turnings away and the turnings toward, and know this is possible all through the redeeming love of Christ. The invitation I often include in my weekly e-newsletter sums it all up for us:

So come, you who have much faith and you who have little, you who have been here often and you who have not been here for a long time, you who have tried to follow, and you who have failed. Come, it is the Lord who invites you.

Amen.