

Right, Wrong and Grace

Psalm 101; 1 John 3:1-10

So, lately, every morning before Nat drives off to work in East Aurora, I read her a psalm at the breakfast table and on Tuesday this week I read her Psalm 101 which is our Call to Worship this morning. You may want to open it up in your bulletins because it's interesting and we're going to start with what David sings about how life will be in the palace now that he is king. So last Tuesday, I read to Natalie these words that David sang about the life he would lead in his palace.

"I will sing," David wrote, *"of steadfast love and of justice to you, O LORD, I will make music and ponder the way that is blameless."* And, so far, David is off on the right foot. He touches on those two qualities we need for any of us to ever find and know God. First, he sings of *"steadfast love"*, not the finite, temporary, ephemeral love that ebbs and flows in human hearts, but the love God grants based on his own character and promises, that love which led Jesus to give himself on a cross so that we, sinful as we are, could become the children of his own Father. This is the sort of love that David wanted underlying the relationships that would form in his household and his government, a love based on trust and faith and covenant and not just on sentiment.

And then David went on to sing, went on to worship God for, his *"justice"*, again not the sort of self-serving, self-satisfying justice that mere men and mere women want to serve out to each other, but rather that justice which came down from God at Sinai in the form of commandments that put us all on level ground, that treat us all as precious before God, set us all on a path toward what is right and away from what is wrong. David sought God for a kind of justice that is beyond what you and I could ever reach without our first fearing and seeking God.

"Oh, when will you come to me?" David sings to God. David wants God to draw near, he wants God close because he knows that the love and justice he sings about will prove beyond his reach unless he also has God's presence. And so far, last Tuesday at breakfast, Natalie was with me and with David. But then David went on to sing, *"I will walk with integrity of heart within my palace; I will not set before my eyes anything that is worthless. I hate the work of those who fall away..."* David sang.

And it was here that Natalie got that "Hey, wait a minute!" look I've seen a thousand times in our marriage. "Hey, wait a minute!" she said, "did David write this before or after the mess with Bathsheba?" The honest answer to most questions she asks me is, "I don't know!" But I couldn't admit that! So I guessed. And my guess was that David sang this before he got in trouble.

Because Psalm 101 struck me as the sort of song you sing early in the game, when you're just set up in the palace and your intentions are good, but you haven't really learned how hard God's love and justice are to reach. And the point here is not that we shouldn't try. As God's king in a holy land, David really did have an obligation to "destroy" those who would slander and betray and undermine what God had commanded as right.

David's duty as king and judge over God's people was to bring down the "haughty" and "arrogant", to bring to justice the "wicked", to drive "evildoers" out of the Holy City. It was David's job to look with "favor" it says, in other words with grace, "upon the faithful of the land, that they may dwell with me."

The point being that Israel's king in the centuries before Jesus was supposed to act as a Savior toward those who were "faithful" and as a judge against those who didn't want or respect the love God offered them and the justice he commanded them to live out. In his day, David was the Christ appointed by God to live out God's love and God's justice in the songs he sang, the relationships he kept and the kingdom he ruled. Which is what got me in trouble at the breakfast table last Tuesday. Because you can't fool Natalie.

She's read David's life story, she knows that David didn't discipline his eyes to look straight. David's eyes are where his trouble started. And he didn't tame his heart to live straight, and he didn't get rid of all the bad guys. In fact, by every visible measure, David fell painfully, glaringly short of anything like God's justice. And all I could say to Natalie about the psalm I'd read to her is that it wasn't wrong for David to sing about and to want and try to be things that turned out to be beyond his reach.

And a thousand years after David, old man John and the early Christians would be wrestling with the same paradox. Remember how John started this letter? "*This is the message we have heard from Jesus and announce to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him and walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from sin.*"

"Hey, wait a minute!", we might say to John, "If we really are walking in the light, why would we need to be cleansed from sin?" John had already anticipated the question, he goes on: "*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" So in this letter, John seems to be living on the edge of a paradox. "Little children," he writes, "I

write this to you that you may not sin, But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus... ”.

So we shouldn't sin, but we have sin, so we're cleansed of sin, but even so we shouldn't sin, John teaches right from the start in his letter. Which can only begin to make sense if we remember that the whole business, our whole standing with God is based on the “*steadfast love*” which was the first thing David sang, about what life would be like once he was king. John puts it this way, he says: “*See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God; and so we are!*” David was king, not because he was worthy but because God loved him. We are God's children, not because we earned it, but God loved us in advance of our wanting or trusting him.

And the first symptom of our being loved and known by God, John tells us, is a sort of disorientation to the world around us the way it is. He writes, “*The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know Christ.*” Not that Jesus wasn't friendly. He was criticized for being too friendly with tax collectors and big drinkers and women of uncertain backgrounds. The point here is not that light, that holiness is unfriendly and ungenerous. Real holiness is giving and forgiving to a fault. But no matter how kind and forgiving holiness wants to be, holiness is different, Jesus was different, bounded and fenced by heavenly rules, guided and motivated by heavenly justice.

But somehow it was consistent with God's holiness to make us his children, untidy and unfinished and unpolished as we are. Christ's death on the cross allows the Father to take us in and work with us as we are. And so John writes we are on a path toward a sort of justice that we can't even comprehend, he says, “*Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be is not yet revealed, but we know that, when Christ is revealed, we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is.*”

This is why David began his song by singing to God, “*Oh, won't you come to me?*” because we find God, we become like Christ by seeing him for who he is, starting here and now, in the time and space we make to worship and pray and learn about him right here, right now in our ordinary lives. But we will never be entirely like him until he returns and is right here with us and we see him face to face. It is closeness to Jesus that makes us like him, not will power and effort and correctitude and propriety. We become like him in the here and now to the extent we seek him and want him and trust him in the here and now.

So John goes on to tell us that “*...everyone who has fixed this hope on Christ purifies himself as Christ is pure.*” If we believe he loves us and we trust his forgiveness, we will love what and whom Christ taught us to love and we abhor what Christ abhors, dishonesty and selfishness and

lawlessness. Like David setting up his palace, we take as a foundation that steadfast love, that love defined by covenant, that God provides us as we want him and seek him and come to know him. But then we go on to reach for that justice, that holiness and purity that exalts what God says is right and abhors what God says is wrong. We will seek to be pure as Jesus is pure.

Remembering all the while that Jesus didn't practice any sort of heartless, antiseptic purity that turns up its nose at the ordinary struggles of ordinary people, but he practiced a purity that was warm, unafraid to touch people who seemed sordid and unclean, able to meet people where we are and call us, lead us toward a purity we could never attain unless God came to us, reached for us in the area code where we live.

That's why David sang at the beginning of his reign, "...*when will you come to me?*" Because to reach the justice of God one must know and live in the presence of God. It follows that no one draws near Jesus without experiencing just how warm and forgiving is his grace. And no one really knows or loves him without taking to heart just how severe and demanding is his justice.

John warns us, "*Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous. Whoever practices sin is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning...No one born of God practices sin. For God's seed abides in him and he is not able to sin.*" This verb "practice" is what makes sense of the paradox John teaches in this letter.

The point here is not that being "*born from above,*" possessing "*an anointing from the Holy One*" makes any of us perfect and sinless in the here and now. John's already said, "*If we say that we have not sinned, we make God a liar and his Word is not is us!*" What John is saying is that to know the "*steadfast love*" David sang about, to take to heart the "*justice*" God calls us to live out will require us to live in a kind of gospel paradox. Christ calls us both to reach for what is beyond us, and to trust God for forgiveness when we fail to get there, and then to reach again for what is beyond us.

I think this is what Paul was talking about when he claimed to "*walk by faith and not by sight*", when he wrote about the presence of Christ in our hearts as being something like a "*treasure...in an earthen pot*". God's justice is beyond us on the one hand, as David surely proved, but it must change us if we really take it to heart. And I think David's life proved that as well. Ultimately it is about trust God both accept us as we are, and to change us into someone better than we are.

Paul put it this way, he wrote to the early believers, "*I am confident of this very thing, that he who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day that Jesus returns.*" If we believe that is true, we will find the hope we need to practice righteousness no matter how difficult it turns out to be.