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“Innocent and sincere?”

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I think this is an awful story. If I gave you this story to preach on, you would probably say no, and that’s about what I wanted to say when I read through it. How am I supposed to preach on this story? Its full of human drama, intrigue, and revenge, misuse of power, and all kinds of things in between. It ends in tragedy. What do we do with that story? I wish I could say that it is a story of humankind that is an uncommon and isolated incident, it rarely happens. Unfortunately, I can find way too many stories throughout history of human power and its use gone bad, how tragedy has ensued. I mean, if I asked you for examples you could probably come up with some yourselves.

Since we are thinking about beheadings, I thought about Henry VIII, another kind of king that goes the wrong way, especially in how he treats his wives. But that’s not the only circumstance; I think about colonialization and how people went out into the world and met people who were different than themselves, and decided they were evil, and we continued to deal with the consequences of our inability to see the earth as the Lord’s and all those who dwell in it. Perhaps as we read this particular passage, we can read it as a cautionary tale, how human power goes wrong when it’s misused, when it’s used only for selfish purposes. But, when it’s all about power, how easy it is to go to violence and tragedy. So I want to ask is there another way?

I feel like scripture always invites us to see that other way. Today I felt like it was the Psalm that was particularly speaking to that, at least in a more simple way. I looked at the Ephesians passage and thought, there is so much to unpack there that we could spend a couple hours here today, we’ll touch on it. But I thought the Psalm was pretty clear in offering that alternative way.

First, it invites us to remember, that really, I am not the center of the universe. That first line is really like the Copernicus revolution where we found out that the earth was not the center of the universe. Instead, it tells us the earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it, the world, and all who live in it. Just that shift, recognizing that I need to think about someone external, that external one who created all that is, the one whose place it really is, the people who are really God’s people. And in thinking about that, realizing; Oh, perhaps I have some accountability then. If everything is the Lord’s, then how I treat it reflects on how I care about who God is. How I treat other people reflects on how I think about who God is. For they are God’s people, it is God’s world, it is God’s earth; so, perhaps I have some accountability to God, in regards to what I do with what is God’s.

The Psalm goes on to invite us to think about how we will live that up. It talks about having clean hands and a pure heart, not lifting our souls to what is false, and to not swearing deceitfully. A fairly simple description of what it means to be living accountable to God. Although I always like to go and look a little deeper into those things, because when it says clean hands and a pure heart; you know I have been doing a lot of gardening and I don’t think that it means that I have just washed my hands well after gardening. Clean hands and a pure heart can also be translated as, innocent, and sincere. And not lifting our souls to what is false suggests we in our lives discerning

and turning from what is false. The final phrase is to not swear deceptively which seems to mean not using false promises, not using deceit to get our own way. The only problem I had when I did look at that these meanings and especially when looking at the idea of being innocent and sincere I felt that was long ago and far, far away. I thought about after living a few years, I don't always find it easy to see myself as innocent or having quite the sincerity I had as a child. Perhaps you've experienced that, the sense of loss of innocence and the struggle with sincerity. Both of those feel like things that I would love to be able to have and to work directly from. But sometimes I struggle.

It is, in fact, including the discerning and turning from what is false that engages with my innocence and sincerity, my clean hands and clean heart. Sometimes it feels like simply living as human beings is hard to do. And, while that statement is very simple, I wonder can we really do it? I we struggle to do it on our own.

You know its interesting that the time between Pentecost, the end of May or beginning of June, and advent is called ordinary time. And so as we think about living in ordinary time, I think about often in ordinary time the struggle is with innocence and sincerity, discerning and turning from what is false, trying not to manipulate to get what I want, making false promises to get relief, to find a way forward.

There at least a couple problems, it feels like, with entering into what the Psalm is inviting us to do, to be those who are seeking the Lord and to know the Lord's blessing. One is, I have to be realistic about being human. You see, I think that humans struggle with frailty, foibles, and failures. We don't always have the strength to do what we should be able to do. Sometimes circumstances are beyond our capabilities. And then we have foibles, we have those particular ways of seeing something, or a pet peeve, that can get in the way of our caring for someone else. Then, we have our right-out failures, where we fail to do the very things we want to do, that as Paul talks about in Romans, the good we want to do that we do not do. Sometimes those failures are involved in recognizing that something is probably a better way to go, but I'm not sure that way is going to get me what I want, and so I struggle with that and work through it and often fail to do the very thing I knew was the better way. So, some of that is kind of personal, we struggle with what it means to be innocent and sincere.

The other is our context and the forces upon us the pressures us to live keeping up with our neighbors' ways of doing things. How we've learned to see the world is a force that shapes the way we live. I mentioned that colonialism led us into separating ourselves into races for example. And that falsity, that idea that there are really races has created the long-lasting consequences. We live with the personal and systemic issues this has perpetrated.

We also live in a system in which we participate in that is causing the climate to change. And yet, I don't always know how not to do that. My life, our lives, are so imbedded in the way we use energy to heat, cool, and give us mobility to name a few ways we participate, that change seems incredibly difficult. And the scope of the problem seems overwhelming. What can we do?

Well sometimes we are told we are just supposed to have more strength of will. But I don't think this is an inside job. I don't think its something we can do just on the strength of our own will. In fact, its sometimes hard when we think about the stakes, the struggles, the ways things have gone wrong in our own lives to get to a place where we can think about what it means to be innocent and sincere.

It is indeed why I continually go back to the very basics of faith, so packed into that Ephesians passage, but in there we see the forgiveness of our trespasses and how important it is to know that through God's grace and God's forgiveness opens up a space, a place for us to retouch that sense of innocence. One, I believe, recognizes again the hope of innocence, the hope of sincerity as the relationship with Christ forms through the forgiveness we are given insights and wisdom about God's will.

Now there is a lot more to this relationship such as we get to be children of God. There are all kinds of things in that Ephesians passage, but in general this passage is describing the opportunity God is giving us and the help that we need through a relationship with Christ. It doesn't start with something we already have but we need that external grace, that external goodness, that external teaching, the opportunity to align with Christ and be the people of God. In some ways I feel like often that is kind of the way the word speaks into our lives; it invites us to hear that possibility. And then we become engaged with the word, and it invites us to engage in our own situation, to engage in our daily lives as we act and react to one another, as we think about how we are accountable to God, to see where we can open up that space of innocence and sincerity, live discerning and turning from the false and actively refuse to use the deceitful way.

Now I have thought about how we do this on a moment-by-moment basis. If I took every moment in my life and tried to think about how it was fitting or not fitting, I'd move a lot slower, and I don't know that we can really do it. But it does invite us to do that kind of reflection and what I think happens, is as we do that reflection, as we listen to Christ, as we look for how others are living out Christ in their lives, how hear the spirit at work among us; that work begins to shift us from what is automatic and the way I have been socialized. Now some of that I hope was a socialization into living as one of Christ's disciples, but we each will have different histories of how we imagine the world to be. And so it is that we are invited to make that shift and let Christ re-socialize us into the family of faith, to be God's people, because when we change our imagination, our view, our automatic responses, when we have that kind of base, we don't always have to think about every single thing we do. It becomes just what we do, becomes natural. And if it would all become natural then we would never have to have a sermon like this, but I know that for myself I have to reflect.

I have been doing a lot of reflecting recently on these very issues in my own life and how these passages both invite me to have the hope and the grace of God through the forgiveness of our trespasses and through the insights and wisdom we find in Christ to God's will and way; and how it's always opening before us and invites us to see anew and try again. When we think about what we talked about today we need to have the sense of accountability to God that the earth is the Lord's and all who dwell in it, or things can go terribly wrong, and we see the human tragedies. We need that alternative way, we need to know that innocence and sincerity, discerning and turning from the false, and refusing to use deceit to get our way are part of God's way. And, we need the help, we need to acknowledge that we need the help from Christ, the forgiveness, the knowledge, and the wisdom to use in our everyday living, it is by God's grace that we are given that help. Thank God for that. Amen