



November 5, 2006
Stewardship Sunday

Lamentations 3:22-24
Great Is Thy Faithfulness
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Earlier this week the Associated Press ran a story about a man and his son who were fishing in Atlantic City and caught a plastic bag containing 300 letters written to God. Most of them were unopened. With a little investigation it was discovered that a recently deceased pastor in New Jersey had invited people to mail their prayers to God to his church where they would be placed on the altar and prayed over again. Apparently after the pastor's death a couple of years ago, someone cleaned out his house and for some reason cast the letters to God into the ocean.

The AP article quoted from some of the letters. A few prayed to God for things like hitting the lottery or getting the IRS to back off. But most of the letters were filled with the pathos of people whose lives are in shambles. A woman who was about to give birth prayed that God would make the father of the baby fall in love with her and propose marriage. Others prayed to be forgiven sins for which they had not forgiven themselves. Still others were written by family members who begged God to help loved ones who were addicted, or very sick, or in harm's way. And all of the prayers ended up in the ocean.

As a pastor, I found that the article broke my heart. That's because I know that this reveals our deepest fear about spirituality. We fear that our prayers never make it to God and are simply cast upon the waters, unopened.

We are not the first people tempted to this fear. When Jeremiah wrote his prophecy, Jerusalem was in shambles. It had been destroyed by the Babylonian armies; its best and brightest citizens taken captive. Notice how the third chapter of Lamentations begins: "I have seen affliction" (3:1); "I am enveloped in bitterness and tribulation" (3:5); "My soul is bereft of peace. I've forgotten what happiness is" (3:17). His lament is relentless in telling the hard truth about how it is. "All is in shambles."

Have you ever prayed because your life is in shambles? Yesterday I buried a 53-year-old mother. It was very apparent that the hearts of her husband and children were in shambles. A church in our presbytery is today filled with hearts in shambles because their pastor just killed himself. I have a student who was just diagnosed with a terrible disease. Her health is in shambles, as everyone's is eventually.

Even if you and your family have been able to keep life together, every day we confront a world which is simply in shambles. Iraq, Gaza, Afghanistan, Sudan, New Orleans ... the list goes on and on. Seldom does a Sunday go by in our worship services when we do not pray for God to put life back together again. What happens to these prayers? Are they just cast upon the waters?

Absolutely not! As Jeremiah continues to make his way through this third chapter, he presents a great reversal beginning in verse 21. "But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness." Isn't that striking? Everything is falling apart and suddenly Jeremiah starts singing *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*. How did he get there? By "calling to mind" his firm conviction that God hears us. Jeremiah knew that we don't need letters sent to a pastor, and we don't need them set upon an altar. God's hears the lament of human hearts because his steadfast love never ceases, or as a more literal translation of the Hebrew states, "His love is never cut off from us."

So the Hebrews are called to live hopeful lives not because things are improving, and not because they can work hard enough to improve their lives. They have hope because they are not cut off from the love of God. And being loved by God gives us all the hope we need.

Those of us living on this side of the cross of the incarnation of God can even say that God is literally dying to love us. The cross of Jesus Christ is planted in history as an eternal proclamation that no matter what you have done and no matter what has been done to you, nothing can cut you off from the love of God. It is the one thing you can never, ever lose.

Do you know who taught me this? People who are dying. People who have spent too much time in hospitals. And people who have lost everything they spent a lifetime building. Early in my pastoral ministry I looked at those whose lives were in shambles and wondered why they didn't get angry at God. Some did. But those who had spent their lives paying attention to the love of God consistently said, "Why would I get angry at God? Love is never dependent on getting what you want. Love is the thing that keeps you together when everything else is falling apart."

The love of God is the most powerful force in the world. It was love that created the world, your life and all life, and it was love that created for you a future filled with hope. Who knows what can happen to a life or a world that is just cherished by God?

We don't earn this love—or deserve it. No one ever deserves love. It just comes as a mercy that originates in the heart of God. And according to Jeremiah, this mercy keeps showing up as new and faithful as the morning. Each day, in more ways than we can see, God is breaking through with mercies that never end. Who of us made the sun rise by our hard work? Who earned the breath in their lungs? Who deserves the love they enjoy from the people closest to their hearts? None of us. It all comes as daily, unceasing mercies. But we are so busy trying to create and secure our own lives that we rush past all of the love letters God keeps sending. Without the love of God our lives would reduce to a shambles of busy futility.

When you say, “I love you,” to someone though, you’re looking for a response. And it is a very particular response. You don’t want to hear from the other person, “Well, thank you for sharing,” or “I knew that.” No, of course, the only acceptable response is “I love you, too.” And that is really what is at the heart of stewardship.

Yes, stewardship is about our responsibility and mission to use our lives for things that make a difference. That certainly includes returning to God a percentage of the money he has invested in our lives. But to be clear, that is nothing more or less than saying, “I love you, too.” Stewardship is a way of proclaiming, “Your faithfulness to me, O God, has been great—when life was good and when it was a shambles. And so, now, will my faithfulness to you be great.”

This week you will receive a letter from our Stewardship Committee, which will join the brochure you received from them last week. These mailings have tried to explain the financial challenges and opportunities for ministry that are now before this church. When you receive the pledge card in the mail this week, treat it as the holy covenant that it is. If you have other family members in your home, talk to them about this card. Pray over your response to it and “call to mind” the great faithfulness of God in your life. Then fill out the pledge card and bring it with you to church next week, when we will dedicate them to God. But please don’t set it in the pile of junk mail and catalogues on the kitchen counter. It is too important for that. This is an opportunity for you to say to God, “I love you, too.”

Benediction: *The mercies of God in your life never end. They are new every morning. But you have to see them to enjoy them. Amen.*