

Journeys of Love: We Need Help
Psalm 25:1-10
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
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Years ago, Frederick Buechner wrote a book entitled *Telling the Truth: the Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale*. In it he writes, “The Gospel is bad news before it is good news. It is the news that man is a sinner, to use the old word, that he is evil in the imagination of his heart, that when he looks in the mirror . . . what he sees is at least eight parts chicken, phony, slob. That is the tragedy. But it is also the news that he is loved anyway, cherished, forgiven . . . That is the comedy. . . . [But] the [real] news of the Gospel is that extraordinary things happen to him just as in fairy tales. Zaccheus climbs up a sycamore tree a crook and climbs down a saint. Paul sets out a hatchet man for the Pharisees and comes back a fool for Christ. . . . For God all things are possible. That is the fairy tale.”

You and I start this morning with the tragedy. Yet another school shooting. Children and teachers killed in the blink of an eye. Children and teachers cowering in fear, scarred by the death of friends and loved ones. You and I are overwhelmed by the darkness and loss at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, only two hundred miles from where we sit.

This first word is a true word. You and I live in a time of great challenge. We are surrounded every day by people who are flawed and fallible and sometimes just angry and mean. And that great darkness dwells not only out there, out in our broken world, but also within us, in our hearts.

This is what the Bible means when it speaks of transgressions and sins, both others and ours. This is why we hear again this morning about our need for deliverance and salvation.

It is this simple and this painful. Our world is a mess. Often we are a mess. We need help, divine help. We need the great love of Jesus Christ to bring us to God.

When Anne and I moved here in 2012, I found Sarasota Memorial Hospital to be very confusing at first. The buildings were constructed at different times – 1955, 1969, 1976, 1983, 2005, and then the courtyard tower in 2013. Even now, it is easy for me occasionally to end up in the wrong room or get off on the wrong floor.

I think it’s the same for us spiritually. We hear about tragedy, and we are tempted to get off on the wrong floor, perhaps the floor of overwhelming anger. Whose fault was this? How could he have done such a thing? We give in to all our angers, and we point the finger of blame. The anger consumes us. At the convenience store, in the grocery aisle, if we are not careful, we discover we have become angry people.

Or maybe it is a different wrong floor. Perhaps we are tempted to get off at the floor of overwhelming despair. We hear about the latest catastrophe, and it is too much. We give in to hopelessness, throwing up our hands, retreating into our homes, reaching for the next drink or the next binge watching adventure on Netflix. If we are not careful, we discover that in order to protect ourselves, we have pulled away from any real connection with other people.

Please don’t misunderstand. Sometimes, anger, for example, is exactly a part of the right response. I think that is true now. I hope many of us are right now contacting our senators and representatives, encouraging appropriate gun control and other legislation to protect our children. But when I speak of overwhelming anger I’m talking about something deeper and insidious and pervasive, an evil which threatens to pull us away from our true selves.

Any way you look at it, life is terribly difficult. The Bible is honest with us this morning. Throughout our days, we encounter not only experiences of great pain and loss, but also adversaries and enemies. As the psalmist writes, we rub right up against the “wantonly treacherous.”

Think about that description: wantonly treacherous, people who are deliberately and purposefully disloyal, deceitful, backstabbing and two-faced.

In the face of it all, we need help. We need divine help. Psalm 25 is filled with one consistent plea after another. Lead us in your truth, O God, and teach us. Don't remember our mistakes, but in your great love, remember us. Teach us what is right, and lead us in your ways.

More than anything else, through this world of darkness and anger and despair, you and I must ride our spiritual elevator to the right floor, to the floor of love. You and I are invited to reflect God's great love in our own journey. That is how the psalmist sums it up: "All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness."

When I am encountered by someone who is acting as if they are an adversary or enemy, sometimes it helps me to picture them as a child, uncertain and questioning. It helps me to remember that they may sometimes feel as wounded and uncertain as the rest of us.

When I am encountered by despair, it helps me to breathe, to remember that this is a moment, an important moment, yes – but only a moment.

In those ways, you and I are invited to look the pain of the world in the eye, never give up on trusting God, and keep on loving others in Christ's name. Charles Aaron, a Methodist pastor in Texas, is exactly right: "Our current distress must not impede our development in wisdom. Even through grief and rage and fear, we can trust a God of steadfast love and mercy."

Stephen Cook is a professor of Old Testament at Virginia Seminary. He points out that Psalm 25 is an acrostic poem. There is no way to recognize it in the English translation, but in the original Hebrew, each line begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In almost every line, we are reminded that the Christian life is about instruction, not "merely pious prayer and spiritual groping. . . . What's more, the Hebrew letters of the psalm's initial, middle and final lines spell out the Hebrew verb *'alaf*, which means 'learn.' This psalm is about learning from beginning to middle to end.

I was reminded of that this week when several members of our church were facing great distress. As their family members surrounded them with kindness and care, it was not enough to live on a wing and prayer, not enough to be uncertain, simply hoping the best. They needed much more than that. They needed to rest on confidence in God's will and ways, knowing

that love is stronger than darkness,
that God's presence is sure and certain,
that in Christ the end of death is life.

I believe you can tell you are in a healthy church when those around you find the strength to tell the truth. They point to the bedrock of their faith: Christ died for us that through his great love he might bring us to God. We can trust God, even when we are opposed and defeated by our deceitful, backstabbing, two-faced enemies. Even when we are a mess, life and love are stronger than death and darkness.

I love the opening words of Psalm 25: "To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust."

Brothers and sisters, perhaps that is the greatest gift of all: the gift of trusting God. You and I are granted faith in the One who is dependable, never failing, always trustworthy.

I was reminded of this when Anne and I headed out to Benderson Park to see Circus Sarasota. We made our way to our seats, and settled in. We enjoyed the horses, the dogs, the clown, the feats of strength and magic. But the highlight of the evening for me was the acrobatic group. One performer after another launched themselves from their trapeze, flying through the air high above the center ring. One turned a triple somersault before connecting with their partner.

I found myself thinking: The greatest wonder was not the gyrations of the performers in mid-air, the beauty and amazement of their twists and turns. The greatest wonder is that every time – every time – they were caught by their partner. His role wasn't quite as flashy; he didn't turn any flips. He wasn't at the very center of the spotlight.

But he had the most important role of all. He caught his partners as they flew through the air – first time, last time, every time. He was trustworthy, completely dependable, always there to catch them.

In daily life, there is no absolute certainty. There are no promises. But one thing is sure: God's steadfast love endures forever. God will deliver us through Jesus Christ, as we let go of our faults and failings, as we refuse to get off on anger or despair.

We need help. So let us trust. Let us trust. And God in Christ will lead us every step of the way forward in our journey of love.