

Wild Dignity
Psalm 31:1-5,9-17a
Sermon by Mag Richer Smith
Lent 2, February 25, 2018

¹ *In you, O Lord, I seek refuge;
do not let me ever be put to shame;
in your righteousness deliver me.*

² *Incline your ear to me;
rescue me speedily.*

*Be a rock of refuge for me,
a strong fortress to save me.*

³ *You are indeed my rock and my fortress;
for your name's sake lead me and guide me,*

⁴ *take me out of the net that is hidden for me,
for you are my refuge.*

⁵ *Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.*

⁹ *Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;
my eye wastes away from grief,
my soul and body also.*

¹⁰ *For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;
my strength fails because of my misery,
and my bones waste away.*

¹¹ *I am the scorn of all my adversaries,
a horror to my neighbours,
an object of dread to my acquaintances;
those who see me in the street flee from me.*

¹² *I have passed out of mind like one who is dead;
I have become like a broken vessel.*

¹³ *For I hear the whispering of many—
terror all around!—
as they scheme together against me,
as they plot to take my life.*

¹⁴ *But I trust in you, O Lord;
I say, 'You are my God.'*

¹⁵ *My times are in your hand;
deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.*

¹⁶ *Let your face shine upon your servant;*

save me in your steadfast love.
¹⁷ *Do not let me be put to shame, O Lord,*
for I call on you;

This week our community made the national news.
Floods, water in our houses and businesses...
Mess... *Distress*...for ourselves and our neighbors.
We *look for* a caring community...people who will lift
sandbags and help us deal with the muddy situations in life.
This week meals have been shared and visits have been
made, and we celebrate a church family that *springs into*
action.

But today we encounter a Psalm in which *close community*
has become something to fear.

What if the whispering is about us?

Ellen was a member of the congregation in which I grew up.
When her husband who was just 31 years old had a fatal
heart attack, Ellen was left to parent her 4 young children
alone.

And as an elementary school child, I saw the best of
community in action,
as our congregation surrounded Ellen
with all sorts help and care-giving.
And Ellen's faith and courage in the midst of personal
devastation made her one of the *most respected* persons in
our congregation...
UNTIL she started dating a man who had been divorced.

This was the era in the Mennonite Church when marrying
someone who had been divorced was an *abomination*.

And suddenly Ellen became the butt of whispers & outrage, and she was *warned* that if she moved toward marriage with that man, she would no longer be welcome in our congregation.

Watching this transpire, coupled with the teenage girls who were *compelled* to stand before the congregation and *confess* the sin of having cut their hair made congregational life scary for me as a child with very short hair. There was clarity about who was in/ and who was out/ and who the sinners were. And my great fear was that I might be found in the OUT category.

Decades later, sitting high in the bleachers at a small town basketball game, I was struck by the beauty and gift of a community who knows and cares for one another ...and comes together to cheer each other on.

And at the same time, my thought was,
“BUT all of this has a shadow... what *if we fail* here?”
What if we *mess up* financially?
What if our marriages *don't make it*?
When our children *deviate*...
When we *make bad* decisions...
When we *come out of* hiding...
Is close community FRIEND or FOE?

A college student once shared:

“Everyone with Addictions wants to hide, because we feel powerless and dependent, and we are afraid how the “Good” people, (especially in the church) will view us if we are found out!”

A friend who teaches in an Academic setting shared:
"In academia, I could never reveal my past bouts with anxiety and psychosis, Because it would be an occasion for people to poke fun I fear I would not be taken seriously and my papers would not be published."

SOCIAL SHAMING...HUMILIATION... REJECTION...

That awful fear that our own community may not have *space or grace* enough for somebody like me...
That fear that when we have been *held up for inspection*, We are going to be *found flawed and wanting...*
What IF the whispers are about us?

THIS IS a PRIMAL FEAR...*more scary than death.*
The fear of being shamed is not only present for those who make mistakes or who don't somehow measure up...
But also for those who succeed, because the more we succeed *the higher the bar is raised!*

And we go to that bar and drink in the intoxicating approval (that turns out to be about as nourishing as cotton candy)!
But a whole *lifetime spent pursuing the pseudo-safety* of the crowd's esteem is not unusual.
There is so much pressure to look good!

Next Sunday night if we watch the Academy Awards, likely we'll hear reporters asking the stars as they enter the arena in their stunning gowns:
"WHO are you wearing?!"

That is actually a very spiritual question...

Who are We Wearing?

To whom have we given the POWER to define our value,
to judge our *performance*,
to measure our *worth...?*

Whom do we WEAR? And whom do we FEAR?

People who survive humiliating experiences RARELY forget it.
We can spend enormous time nursing the memories of
those experiences and continuing to *loath the people* who
have inflicted them on us.

Do you think *any of those young girls who had to confess
cutting their hair* REMAINED in that congregation? *I don't think so!*

After reading *THE SCARLET LETTER*, I was pretty sure that
if I were Hester Prynne and I was forced to wear the big "A"
in my community, I'd be *out of that town!*
I'd *escape* to someplace like New York City
or *hide out* in the mountains of Montana.

This past fall, Bob and I visited the new African American
Museum in Wash DC...and one historical fact that I had
somehow missed before was that even after the slaves were
freed, the census bureau continued to count freed slaves as
only 3/5 human.

Categorical dehumanizing of a people is shaming at its
worst.

I have a friend, now deceased, by the name of Bill Huber. Bill was a Presbyterian Minister who became a pacifist while fighting for the ALLIES during the Battle of the Bulge in WW 2. He had just shot & killed an enemy soldier and then knelt over the body and removed the man's ID. There Bill discovered a picture of this enemy soldier with his wife and young child. And right there, Bill realized that this was ALL wrong...that participation in war requires telling yourself that the OTHER is not as human or as worthy of life as you are.

SHAMING(defined as:

*"the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore UNWORTHY of love and belonging or that someone else is UNWORTHY of love and belonging) fosters violence, oppression, defensiveness, discrimination, and the incessant desire for more accumulation... all to try to prove somehow
that we are ok
or that we are better,
or that we are right.*

PSALM 31 is written by a person of faith who is TRYING to place his his spirit in GOD's hands...
wanting God to be *refuge and strength and stronghold...*
but STRUGGLING as he also utters that primal fear by which *more lives are diminished than by disease.*

Is he really too flawed to be loved and belong?

He pleads:

*"Let THIS cup pass! Rescue me speedily!
Get me out of the net trying to keep me trapped and stuck!
DO not let me be put to shame!"*

The poet experiences the horror of finger pointing in his face.

Sure his enemies and adversaries do this,
But also now it's also his neighbors and friends
The whispering of the community is about him.

*"People hide their faces when they see me!
They want to forget me!
When they see me coming , they turn the other way
And treat me like I am dead!
To them I am a broken vessel beyond repair!
They gossip and scheme against me! "*

The word the Psalmist uses here is "**TERROR!**"

This ancient poet is in the wilderness,
experiencing the scourge of SHAME...
Of being known for who he is and *judged*
"UNACCEPTABLE!"
HE is *humiliated*, and it is *the worst*.

Where does one go with this FEAR?
Where does one *flee with this terror?*

Maybe we go where the Psalmist goes when
He says: "**INTO YOUR HANDS I commit my Spirit ...**
My times are in your hands."

Maybe we go where Jesus goes with his dying breath
"into the hands of God"...

Maybe we go to Jesus
who does not let himself be defined
by his hometown's rejection,
by the betrayal of his friend,
by the shunning & cunning of religious authorities,

or by the mocking of the crowd.
Maybe we go to Jesus' hands
who *takes the nails of humanity's scorn*
and remains centered in his identity as one who is
utterly loved and valued by GOD...
LETTING that be ENOUGH.

Jesus knows the God the Psalmist is struggling to TRUST...
the rock the refuge the stronghold of his life,

The God, who in the very first story comes to the *quivering*
ADAM & EVE in their hiding place,
in their shame and sense of unworthiness.
They know only that they are deserving of death.

So imagine their fear when they hear the sound of God
walking toward them in the garden:

"Adam, Where are you?"

"Humankind, Where are you?"

How trustworthy can God's hands be?
And what do they carry?

God's hands do not carry the flashlight of the detective,
gleefully wanting to expose their hiding place...

God's hands are not holding a policeman's club,
Or the assault rifle of an assailant.
God does not come to destroy humankind and punish their
sins...

(No, I come back to the image of God that I love most)...

God's hands Carry...
a sewing box
into our naked vulnerability & brokenness.

Here is the Gracious CREATOR of the universe and LOVER of all...stooping down to sew new clothes.. beautiful cloaks of fur-a fer-ocious love...

God comes re-clothing quivering humanity with
WILD DIGNITY.

Those who deserve death receive
amazing Grace.

The GOD who carries THE SEWING BOX is REAL.
The God who waits at the door for our return from the wilderness with a robe and a ring and a party is extending outreached hands to all of us...loving and trustworthy hands ...into which we can commit our Spirits.

Nadia Boltz Weber talks about her resistance and reluctance to LET GOD into her shame filled hiding place...

“But GOD COMES,” she says, “while I am screaming,
‘Just let me alone!’”

And then God looks at tiny, little, red-faced me in all my resistance and says,

'You're adorable,'

and then I give in, and God's hands plunk me down on an entirely different path.”

The Psalmist today wants to TRUST the GOD who says,
“Well there you are and I love you there.”

The poet wants to trust the God whose *SPIRIT* wind blows
away *the measuring sticks*
And he wants to *TRUST* the God who stoops to re-clothe us
in the wild dignity of being God's own *adorable children*.
The Psalmist wants to know what Jesus knows...
We are God's beloved, and that is ENOUGH.

Who are you wearing, Jesus?

*I am wearing the ridicule of all the pointed fingers...
the wounds of all YOUR shame...
the nails of all who have called you "unworthy" ...
And of all that oppresses humankind.*

Who are you wearing, JESUS?

*I'm wearing my identity as God's beloved
And tha is enough ...*

Who are we wearing?