**“Refocusing the Light”**

**Sermon on Psalm 79:1-9 for Greenland Hills UMC 9-22-13**

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**Intro:** A sermon is an event in time, not what is written on a page. Each of us brings our own understanding of the scriptures and God with our own life experiences to church. All of this comes together with the Holy Spirit to create the sermon. It is a one-time event never to be repeated. In other words, we are all in this together!

**Prayer:** “Gracious God, I thank you for each one here. I thank you for your Holy Spirit, given to us to help us as we wrestle together with the scriptures, what they reveal about you, us and our journey together. We ask your Spirit to come and open the eyes our hearts that we may hear with new joy what it means to be a discipleship of Jesus Christ. Amen.”

[PAUSE]

Last weekend my daughter turned one. It’s crazy to think that it was just one year ago at this time, we were in Phoenix awaiting approval from the sending state of Arizona and the receiving state of Texas to cross state lines and bring her home. And now, she’s one year old! Along with turning one comes 4 shots, two in each leg, and blood drawn. Oh, it is so hard to watch little ones get poked and prodded. As a parent, it is so hard to see your children hurt. One other thing at the one-year old check up is their eyesight. Imagine this box, shaped like a modem for your computer with a lens on one side and a viewfinder with a digital screen on the other. Now, imagine pointing that at a squirming, writhing child who only wants to reach out and touch this amazing device! The nurse finally gave up and said we would have to try again at a later date. But had she been successful, they would have sent off the results to a pediatric ophthalmologist to see if Olivia needed glasses. I don’t know how many of you have wear glasses, but I was 30 before I had to get glasses.

I discovered this when I was standing in line at a fast food restaurant with a co-worker and I realized that the board was all fuzzy and out of focus. Embarrassingly, I had to ask my co-worker to read the board to me. Sure enough, the eye doctor confirmed I was near sighted and had to have glasses. I’m not a fan of glasses, but I am a fan of seeing more clearly.

Whenever I think of glasses, I think of Cedar Valley College in Lancaster, TX. I worked there for 4 ½ years, and while there, sat on a search committee for a new college president. The final 3 candidates were asked to each come to campus and make a speech to faculty and staff. One of the candidates before making her speech at the podium pulled out her reading glasses. As she did so, she said when she was little, she loved to climb up into her grandfather’s lap and have him read her stories. But before doing so, he would always pull out his reading glasses and say, “These are to help me focus the light.”

I like this expression. Glasses are to help us focus the light. In many ways, this is what scripture is like. It helps us focus the light of God, to grasp a greater understanding of God. But often times, just when we think we have this whole faith in God thing figured out, something happens and things get a little blurry all over again, or sometimes completely out of focus. Perhaps it is being laid off at work, a cancer diagnosis, news that you have to be put on the liver transplant list, a partner has been unfaithful and a relationship you thought would last a lifetime comes to an end. Or perhaps it is something in our larger community or world, another mass shooting, this time in our nation’s capital, with 12 people killed. Or perhaps it is the alleged use of chemical weapons on over 1,400 people, 426 of those children, in a nation deep in civil war. And the list could go on.

So, what if you lived in Jerusalem in the year 587 BC when an invading army from Babylon comes and completely destroys the city, ransacking it, killing thousands, burning it to the ground, and carrying you along with the other survivors off into captivity? What questions might you have for God? Would you feel you had somehow angered God and caused this calamity? Would you call on God to vindicate you by destroying the invading nation? Would you call on God for mercy, to deliver you from captivity? This is what Psalm 79 is about.

[PAUSE]

It is what is known as a Psalm of complaint. Out of the 150 psalms, over 60 of them are complaints, both individual and communal. This particular psalm has been recited by the Jewish people for 1800 years on the 9th day of the month of Ab on the Jewish calendar to remember the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BC and by the Romans in 70 CE. The Psalms in general are a collection of songs, poems, and prayers that have been sung, spoken and prayed individually and communally for hundreds of years. The English name “Psalms” comes from the Greek word “psalmos,” a rough translation of the Hebrew word “mizmor” meaning a song of faith. The majority of the psalms address God directly and cover a full range of human emotions. They are designed to be read, sung, or prayed as individuals or as a community to graphically and vividly portray joy, sorrow, cries of triumph and defeat, doubt, hope and even despair. They are for us. Whenever we need to pray because something terrible has happened or we need to sing because something wonderful has happened. They are for us.

I have to confess, this psalm disturbs me. It really bothers me that it images God as an angry God, One who takes out that anger on God’s own people. I am in good company for feeling this way. John Wesley, the father of Methodism, deleted this psalm, along with 49 others, and heavily edited a good number of those remaining, from the daily prayer book he sent to the Methodists in the United States, because they were “highly improper for the mouths of a Christian Congregation.” And Trish, our church secretary, she too had issues with the way God is portrayed in communal complaints. When putting together the bulletin for today’s service, she said, “I really have a theological problem with the hymn you chose for before the sermon, Why Stand So Far Away, My God? I understand how someone might feel God is far away, but that doesn’t mean God is far away!” [By the way, she gave me permission to tell you that!] God Bless you, Trish!! That is exactly my point. The hymn, like psalm 79, is a communal complaint to God, expressing the common human questions in the midst of tragedy. But because we express it, doesn’t mean God is like that. One thing though that is true when we face tragedy, we have to reorient ourselves toward God, we have to reevaluate who God is and who we are. We have to refocus the light.

For those of us in the Christian faith, we can look to Jesus to help us refocus who God is. Jesus did not go around killing people because they made him angry. In Jesus we see someone who cared for the least of us, who healed and restored people, made them whole. In Jesus, we see God as One who cares for us and meets us in our deepest need and walks with us.

Jesus also called for the people of his day to refocus and reevaluate their understanding of God. Within Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount, following the Beatitudes, we have a series of “You have heard it said, but I say to you….” You have heard it said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you Love your enemies. You have heard it said, you shall not murder, but I say to you anyone who calls his fellow human being a moron is liable. You have heard it said, You shall not commit adultery, but I say to you if you look at another lustfully, you have already committed adultery in your heart. Jesus is calling the people to refocus the light, reevaluate their understanding of God as revealed through the prophets and the law.

This precedent of refocusing, reorienting our understanding of God was not new in Jesus’ day. Job, the oldest book in the Bible, challenges us to do the same thing. Job does everything right. He turns from evil, he prays daily for his family, from what we can tell, he was a good and valued member of his community. And then everything goes from bad to worse. He loses his servants, his crops, his livestock, even his children are tragically killed. Then he comes down with terrible sores all over his body. His wife leaves him and tells him to curse God and die [Now, there’s a supportive partner!] He is sitting in the ashes of what is left of his home, all alone, scrapping the sores on his skin with broken pieces of pottery. His friends begin to gather and say, “Surely, you have done something to anger God, to cause this.” Much like our Jewish friends in Psalm 79, a common sentiment is expressed about God when tragedy strikes. We have done something to cause our misfortune. But Job does not give in to this way of thinking. Job holds fast. In Job 1:22, we find, “In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong-doing.”

But it doesn’t mean Job didn’t complain. He says, “Today also my complaint is bitter; my hand is heavy despite my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find God… I would lay my case before him.” Have you ever felt like? I know I have.

When Kerry asked if I wanted to preach, she suggested today because it is the Sunday before our North Texas Conference “Call” Sunday, Sept. 29. “Call” Sunday is an opportunity for North Texas clergy and lay people to share how God has called them into ministry. My call to ministry includes a complaint to God.

I grew up in the Methodist church. The Methodist churches we attended were all moderate churches theologically, not too conservative and not too progressive. I loved going to church from the time I was small putting felt characters of Jonah and the whale on felt boards in children’s Sunday school to youth group games and movie nights and eventually as a grown-up serving on finance committees, capital campaign committees, etc. That may seem weird, but I really love church! I love the hymns. I love walking up the stairs to my office behind the sanctuary during the early service, listening to everyone singing. I love the sermons (bad and good). And I love to read the bible. I read the whole bible through in the 4th grade and from then on started a daily habit of scripture reading, prayer and journaling. It gives me peace, a calm center to begin my day. So, after 15 years of working professionally as a graphic artist, I surrendered to the call to serve in the church I love so much. But here’s where my complaint comes in.

I have always known that I as gay. But I did not really begin to deal with it until I got into college. By this time, I had gotten involved with a more conservative side of Methodism, one that viewed homosexuality as a sin. Instead of looking for another church or leave the church as many gay and lesbian people do when confronted with such theology, I stayed. Why? Well, I loved the church. And I believed that God could change me if God wanted to. So I waited for 17 long, lonely years. I didn’t date, I didn’t do anything, but continue to work, go to church, do my daily devotions. Like Job, I thought I was doing everything right. But when I got to Perkins, every conservative theological bone in my body was challenged! And for the first time in my life, I realized I had been following a soul crushing view of God. I had not been living in the light in which God had created me. Perkins helped me refocus the light and gave me a life-giving theology. I have no complaint against God for this. My compliant, my question for God in all of this, is Why the United Methodist Church? The United Methodist Church stands in need of refocusing the light, of reevaluating its stance on homosexuality. I love the church and feel called to serve God in it to the best of my ability, with the help of God’s Spirit for the good of all people; yet, it is in a denomination that does not recognize that call.

Please don’t misunderstand me. I love Greenland Hills and am thankful to God for the opportunity to serve here. Greenland Hills is helping refocus the light with its stance of inclusion and love of God for all people, regardless of sexual orientation. But for me personally, I want to serve as an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church. The church that has nurtured my faith and helped me grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ. But the official word is No. You must follow the Book of Discipline, the rule of law. Perhaps we need to revisit Jesus’ words, “You have heard it said, practicing homosexuals cannot be ordained in the United Methodist Church, but I say to you, the call of God is for all people.”

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest who has been recognized as one of the twelve most effective preachers in the English language by Baylor University, says that when we are disillusioned, out of focus, at those times in our lives when God seems to have gone AWOL, or worse yet, like the community of Psalm 79, believe God is the cause of our distress, she says disillusionment is not so bad.

Disillusionment is the loss of illusion – about ourselves, about the world, about God. And while it is painful, it is not bad to lose the lies we have mistaken for the truth, the lie of a God who in anger destroys us and all we love.

It does mean, like Job, we must refocus the light of our faith, believe again in the God revealed in Jesus. One who loves us and walks with us in the midst of tragedy, and understands because he too was human and walked the earth in our shoes, suffering unto death, only to rise again, looking forward to a better day for all creation. May we walk in the light of Jesus.

**Thanks be to God.**