

“I love you, too”
Lamentations 3:22-24
Collegiate Presbyterian Church
October 17, 2010

Lamentations 3:22-24 (KJV)

²²It is of the LORDS mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not.

²³They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness.

²⁴The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him.

Sermon

You may have heard about the man and his son
who were fishing one day in Atlantic City and
caught a plastic bag containing 300 letters written to God.¹

Some were opened, but most were not.
Investigators speculate that
a New Jersey pastor had invited people
to mail him their prayers to God,
promising that he would place them on the altar of his church
and pray over them again.

Well, this pastor died
and apparently the folks who cleaned out his house
decided to cast the “letters to God” out to sea.
The news reports quoted some of more humorous letters -
one man prayed to hit the lottery... not once, but twice.
He prayed that the first jackpot would be \$50,000...
and then, after a while, he would be ready for a million.
Another prayed that God would stop a woman
from sicking the IRS on him.

But most of the letters were filled with the pathos
of people whose lives were falling apart.
The man who found them was quoted as saying,
“There are hundreds of lives here,
a lot of struggle, washed up on the beach,”

A woman whose baby was due in four weeks prayed
that God would make the child’s father love her
and marry her so the child would have a father.

Another prayed that God would forgive her
for a sin she could not forgive herself of.
Still others pleaded for family members...
begging God to help their loved ones who were struggling
with unfaithful spouses or disease or addictions.

All those heartfelt prayers ended up in the ocean...
and after that, auctioned off on eBay.

¹ <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15532993/>

As a pastor, this breaks my heart.²
First, just for the depth of pain...
the sheer desperation so many of these people felt.
Though most do not show it in public,
so many people are really struggling...
so many are really hurting.
It's true in the church as well.

But my heart also breaks
because what eventually happened to these letters
reveals what I think
is one of our greatest fears about the life of faith –
it is that our prayers,
no matter how desperate...
no matter how heartfelt,
our prayers never quite make it to God's ears.
Instead, they end up cast upon the waters... ignored... unopened.

We are not the first people to have this fear.
One of the great gifts of being a Biblical people
is that we know others have been here before us.
For instance, when these words in Lamentations were spoken
God's people were in the depths of despair.
Jerusalem had been overrun by Babylon...
the temple was a heap of rubble...
the brightest and best of God's people
had been taken captive.
And the lamenting was great: "I am one who has seen affliction..."
"I am besieged and enveloped
by bitterness and tribulation..."
"Though I call and cry for help,
he shuts me out my prayer..."
"My soul is bereft of peace;
I have forgotten what happiness is..."³

Have you ever prayed this way?
Of course, you have... your child was very, very sick...
your husband was unfaithful to you...
your career was jettisoned...
the debt was smothering you...
you could no longer manage your addiction.
The lament in our passage today is raw...
it is honest...

² For the inspiration and much more in this sermon I am indebted to M. Craig Barnes, who preached *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*, to the Shadyside Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, PA. on November 5, 2006.

³ Chapter 3, selected verses.

it is relentless.

And yet... and yet...

listen as this same one who laments so passionately
ALSO testifies to his hope:
“But this I call to mind, and therefore 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.”

This is the great reversal!
Everything is falling apart...
his entire life is crumbling around him...
yet suddenly he is singing:

Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided –
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!"

How does he get there?

He gets there by calling to mind his firm conviction
that God hears us when we pray...
He gets there by remembering
that we don't need to send letters to a pastor...
we don't need to set them on an altar.
God hears the lament of our hearts
because God loves us with a steadfast love...
because “God's love is never cut off from us.”⁴

Those of us living on this side of the cross
might even say that God is dying to love us.
The cross of Jesus is planted in human history
as an eternal proclamation that
no matter what you have done...
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.⁵

I confess that I did not know this when I first became a pastor...do you want to know who taught me?

People who are dying
and who've spent too much time in hospital rooms...
people whose lives are in shambles...
people whose losses are so numerous as to be uncountable.

⁴ A more literal translation.

⁵ Quoted from Barnes' sermon.

Early in my ministry I would sit with these folks
in the hospital,
the nursing home,
at the kitchen table
expecting them to be angry with God...
prepared to do my best pastoral care
with those who felt abandoned by God.
And some were angry...
some did feel cut off from God.
But what I learned is that
those who had spent their life loving and trusting God
eventually would say something like:
“You know, God’s love doesn’t depend on me getting what I want.
God’s love is what keeps me going
when everything else is falling apart.”

Of course, the Scriptures and our Reformed Tradition
are ever ready to remind us that we do not earn this love –
nor do we deserve it.
It is a gift... and according to the text
it’s a gift that keeps showing up fresh every morning.
Each day, in ways we hardly even notice,
ways that I certainly take for granted,
God’s mercies are extended to us.
Who among us, by our own power, made the sun rise today?
Which of us earned the breath we just breathed?
Did any of us create these miracles we call bodies?
Did I arrange the stars that covered me
as I walked the dog last night?
Do we deserve the family and friends
which make our lives so rich and meaningful?
No, all these and more come to us daily...
unceasing mercies from the generous hand of God.
And even though we know this...
we really do know this...
still we stay so busy trying to create our own blessings...
that we rush right past
all of the love letters God is sending us each day.

When you say, “I love you,” to someone,
though you really mean it, let’s be honest...
you’re looking for a response.
And not just any response: “Well, thank you for sharing,”
or “I know that!”
No, you want a particular response...
you want to hear: “I love you, too.” Right?

Well, for Presbyterians, this is really the heart of stewardship.
Stewardship is our way of saying to God:

“I love you, too.”

Whether it is stewardship of our time or our money...
our bodies or our relationships or our environment,
it is our way of saying:

“Your faithfulness to me has been great, O God –
when life was good and when it was not so good.

Your faithfulness has been great...
and now, so will my faithfulness to you be great.”

Next week, when you come to worship,
there will be a packet of materials
waiting for you in the library.

Prepared for you by our Stewardship Committee,
it contains all of the usual pieces you might expect:

There's a cover letter...
there's a budget summary...
and there's a pledge card, of course.

There IS one new piece this year...
in celebration of our centennial year,
our Church and Society Committee
is challenging us to find ways to be in mission
to people or programs in our community.

And, if you are able, perhaps even to give one hundred hours
between now and our grand celebration next May.

You can do this as individuals or couples or families.

You can do it as book clubs
PW circles or
small group Bible studies.

However you do it, figure out what you can do and do it!

My word to you this morning is this:
when you take these two pledge cards in your hand,
please treat them as the holy covenant they are.

Read the reflection on giving in the packet...
talk about the card to the other members of your household...
and pray over your response to it,
and when you do “call to mind”
the great faithfulness of God in your life.

Then fill both cards out
and bring them with you to worship on November 7
when we will dedicate them to God.

But please, please don't set them
in the pile of junk mail and catalogues
on the desk or kitchen counter.

They are too important for that.
This is an opportunity for you to say to God,
“I love you, too.”