

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
World Communion Sunday
October 5, 2025
9:30 AM

Text: Psalm 137 & Luke 17:5-10

[prayer]

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"*

*How can we sing the songs of the Lord
while in a foreign land?*

*Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,
happy is the one who repays you
according to what you have done to us.
Happy is the one who seizes your infants
and dashes them against the rocks. (Psalm 137:1-4, 8-9 NIV)*

Sometimes the lectionary hands us a real doozy of a reading. This week we got two: Psalm 137 and Jesus's parable of the worthless servant. On this World Communion Sunday, when we celebrate the Eucharist, the universal meal of grace, where is the grace in either of these texts?

Psalm 137 is one of a handful of imprecatory psalms in the Bible. Imprecatory, as in "to imprecate" – to utter a curse against someone. The emotional arc of most psalms ends with resolution of some sort – if not happiness, then at least an acknowledgement of God's sovereignty over painful circumstances.

Not so with Psalm 137. What begins with grief gives way to blistering rage and a death wish on the children of Israel's enemies. There is no obvious resolution here, no closure, no tying up feelings in a neat bow and tucking them away. This song ends on an ugly, painful note – a minor chord.

And understandably so. When Babylon invaded Judah and sacked Jerusalem, abducting most of her citizens as prisoners of war, thousands of people were killed. Children were certainly among them. This psalm may offend our civilized sensibilities, but the psalmist is only invoking a familiar human response to pain: They want payback. Revenge. Retribution. An eye for an eye. A punishment that fits the crime.

But wishing for vengeance and doing vengeance are two different things. Notice that the psalmist does not act on their desire for revenge. Instead, they plead with *God* to remember them and the evil that has been done (v. 7). They ask *God* to share in their suffering. And they trust *God* to do the work of justice on their behalf. *Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord* (Deut 32:35). To take revenge is to take the place of God. Despite their righteous anger, the psalmist acknowledges that their anger does not give them the right to usurp God as judge. Revenge is not their job. Their job is remaining faithful to God and His place and His precepts. They could not sing the songs of Zion because of their heartbreak and homesickness. But they could still be faithful by remembering who God is and letting that memory shape a godly response to their suffering. This re-remembering – literally piecing back together who God is in their spiritual and geographical dislocation – was an act of holy resistance even as their captors taunted and tormented them. It was an act of life and hope amid despair and devastation.

I love this psalm. I love it because it is raw and honest. So often we are taught, whether explicitly or implicitly, to be ashamed of our uglier feelings. We are taught to squash them down, make them smaller so as not to inconvenience other people, shrink them into hard little nuggets we then tuck away and pretend are not there. But not acknowledging ugly emotions is dishonest. Not acknowledging pretends we are not human. It pretends we are not broken by our pain. It pretends we have nothing to confess before God. It pretends we do not need His compassion and His grace.

The psalmist does not pretend. Instead, they choose to be honest about their rage and despair by engaging in the spiritual practice of lament. Lament is the work of naming suffering and injustice, naming just how far we can stray from the will of God.

But lament is also not permission to wallow in our pain. It acknowledges the pain and then it offers it to God. The psalmist names their desire for revenge and then they turn that desire over to God to whom it rightfully belongs. In so doing the psalmist breaks the cycle of violence and makes room for God's healing.

The worst possible response to evil and injustice is to pretend it is not happening. Grief, outrage, righteous anger – these are appropriate responses, and if someone tries to tell you otherwise, it is because those emotions are uncomfortable, and they are prioritizing personal comfort over compassion. Psalm 137 is an honest, truthful prayer that trusts a compassionate God to listen and respond to the pain underlying an ungodly desire. When we pray, we should trust God to do the same for us. We should trust God enough to bring our whole selves to Him, even the parts that are not “holy” or “acceptable.” We should trust God to receive and transform our hateful desires into the love for our enemies that God commands.

This difficult transformation is a requirement of discipleship. Just prior to his parable on the worthless servant, Jesus says this to his disciples: “Even if someone sins against you seven times in one day and returns to you seven times and says, ‘I am changing my ways,’ you must forgive that person” (Luke 17:4 CEB).

The disciples are incredulous. Clearly the kind of person Jesus speaks of is not trustworthy or deserving of forgiveness. What Jesus has said sounds impossible to do, beyond their ability. And so, they ask him for more faith to meet this high standard of discipleship. “Increase our faith!” they say (v. 5).

They think they already have faith and just need more of it. But Jesus's sharp response implies otherwise. *You don't even possess a mustard seed of faith*, he says, *otherwise you would have the power to uproot a sycamore tree* – a tree that grows upwards of sixty feet tall with deep, strong roots – *and plant it in the sea* – another seeming impossibility.

But the scale of the disciples' faith, and likewise our faith, is not actually the point here. The point is that nothing is impossible for God – even forgiveness of the gravest of sins. We do not forgive those who have wronged us by our own strength; we forgive them through the grace and strength of God. With even only a mustard seed of faith God can do the impossible in and through us.

Jesus isn't done yet, though. After recalibrating the disciples' expectations, he recites the parable of the worthless servant – a story about a farmer with a single servant who works in the fields and also does household chores. It would be normal for this farmer, the master of the house, to expect his servant to serve him dinner before the servant serves himself, even if he is tired from working the fields all day. This is the nature of the master-servant contract.

Jesus is saying to the disciples (and to us): *You are the servant*. And the job of a servant is to serve, even if their master's expectations feel unrealistic. Learning to forgive our enemy may feel unrealistic, even impossible, but we serve a forgiving God who set the highest standard of love on the cross. This is what God expects of us. God owes us nothing for living good, Christian lives, because the ability to live such lives is not the result of our own strength or goodness. It is entirely the work of God's grace in and through us, so long as we honestly offer our whole selves up to God's transforming power.

The communion table is where we come not because we are good at being people of faith, but precisely because we are not. This is the place we can come when we have messed up and be assured of God's forgiveness. This is the place we can come when we are grieving and receive God's comfort. This is the place we can come when we have questions and doubts and still trust that God is listening. This is the place we can come when we are filled with despair about the world and know that we will be fed with the bread of hope. Jesus invites us to this table to taste and see and remember that it is God's goodness, not our own, that saves us. God's grace working in us is what transforms all that is evil and painful in this world.

"Do this in remembrance of me," Jesus says. When we break the bread and drink the cup, we are remembering the monstrous evil that was committed against no less than the Creator of the universe. God knows what it is like to be a victim of injustice. God knows what it is like to suffer. On the cross God took the whole of

human suffering and he transmuted it, transformed it, into love that redeems and resurrects.

There is much in our world that will test our commitment as Jesus's disciples to the high standards he has set for his followers. Even so, our job is to serve God above all else. When we are tempted to act on our hatred and desire for revenge...when we feel like the call to love and forgive is impossible...when we think our grief and despair and pain will swallow us whole...we must turn again and again to God in prayer and confess our frailty. We must ask Him to share our suffering and give us the strength we need to be the disciples He has called us to be. We must ask him to transform our grief and anger into compassion. We must ask him to free us to joyful obedience.

At this table we eat the bread of new birth and drink the wine of compassion.¹ We are transformed, by God's grace, and strengthened for the difficult work of discipleship – sent from this place to serve others on behalf of our gracious Master and invite them to the same experience of transforming grace.

Amen.

¹ https://hymnary.org/text/here_in_this_place_new_light_is_stream

Words of Absolution

And the table
will be wide.
And the welcome
will be wide.
And the arms
will open wide
to gather us in.
And our hearts
will open wide
to receive.

And we will come
as children who trust
there is enough.
And we will come
unhindered and free.
And our aching
will be met
with bread.
And our sorrow
will be met
with wine.

And we will open our hands
to the feast
without shame.
And we will turn
toward each other
without fear.
And we will give up
our appetite
for despair.
And we will taste
and know
of delight.

And we will become bread
for a hungry world.
And we will become drink
for those who thirst.
And the blessed
will become the blessing.
And everywhere
will be the feast.

– Jan Richardson²

² <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2012/09/30/and-the-table-will-be-wide/>