

When We Need Healing  
Psalm 38:1-11, 15  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
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I opened up Facebook the other day and the first post I saw was that of a college friend. "I have cancer," was the first sentence.

We are reminded time and time again of how fragile life is, how often we are hurt or ailing or broken - whether other people know it or not, how quickly things can change. And all too often in the midst of those realities we are not sure what to do.

After all, for as aware as we may be of people we see using social media, or casual conversations, to bring up every last hangnail as if it a life and death situation...as a culture we are really carefully taught to put on a brave face, to not allow ourselves to be vulnerable, to always show that we are okay.

So, where do we go with our pain? Where do we go with our suffering? Where do we go when we are the ones in need of healing? The psalmist says that we can go to God.

Now, if you were listening to this psalm, there are lots of things in it that we can and should talk about. I expect there were some statements in this psalm that some of you reacted negatively to. There are certainly some assumptions in the psalm that I push back against. So, we need to talk about them.

We need to talk about the reality that this psalm assumes a connection between behavior, specifically sin, and physical ailments. While we can certainly name some conditions or situations where a person could have prevented their diagnosis, there are different experiences and understandings in our life and times.

While other cultures across time and space have assumed that everything - from celebrations to sufferings - was what the person deserved because of who they were and how they behaved...

While other cultures across time and space have credited everything - from celebrations to sufferings - to God in a direct cause and effect relationship...

We tend to have different understandings.

Meanwhile, we still know what it is to ask those questions.

What did I do? Why is God punishing me? Is this my fault?

We know what it is to ask those questions even if we don't really think that that's the way the world works or the way God works. We know what it is to ask those questions even when we are ashamed to admit to it.

And the psalmist says we can ask God.

We also need to talk about the way the psalmist credits, or we should say blames, God for what is happening. And again, while we live in a time and a place where our reasoned reactions are rarely to assume that God is the direct cause of our hurts and pains...let's be honest, sometimes we wonder. Sometimes we wonder not just what we have done, but why *God* is doing this to us or to those we love.

And the psalmist says we can name that honestly for God.

Years ago, in a spiritual formation class in seminary, my professor talked about praying outside our theology. If theology is what we believe and understand about God, then how do we pray? And is it okay to pray outside of what we claim to believe. My professor said a resounding yes.

The example my professor gave was this: if I am on an airplane and the engines go out, I do not actually understand that God will reach down, catch the airplane mid fall, and set us gently on the ground. Meanwhile when I board an airplane, I pray to God for a safe flight.

And so, while we might, especially when we are well, read a psalm like this and pull back from it or critique the psalmist's understanding, the psalmist reminds us that even when we are hurting...even when we don't know what to believe...even when we are afraid that we are our own worst enemy *or* that God is our own worst enemy...no matter what there is room for our

questions and our declarations and our worries and our fears. There is room for all of this in our relationship with God.

While there are many conversations to had around this and other psalms...many conversations that we eagerly dive into around the Bible study table...there is also the simple - and profound - reality that the psalms invite us...no matter what...to remain in relationship with God.

Psalms 38 reminds us that this is true whether we are wondering if our theology is even in the right ballpark...this is true when we are worried that the deterioration of our physical health is a sign of our faults or God's punishment...this is true when we simply need a safe place to sit in our anger or our fear or just to have a pity party. Psalm 38 reminds us that we are invited into honest relationship with God in the midst, not only of our healing and wholeness, but in the midst of our deepest hurt and pain.

In fact, it is often in the difficult honesty, in the wondering and asking and even blaming, that we find our way to something that looks like wholeness, that looks like love.

As Rabbi Lord Johnathan Sacks says, "This is how to deal with crisis. Wrestle with it, refusing to let it go until it blesses you, until you emerge stronger, better or wiser than you were before."

At General Assembly a couple weeks ago, I attended a workshop on resilience. I was struck by the comment of one of the leaders who said, "Our bodies and souls hold grief and gratitude at the same time." We know that. We experience that. But all too often we are hesitant to express it. But the psalmist says that we should be able to express them both. And the psalmist says God is a safe place for just that.

After all, in Psalm 38 we hear it all...

What did I do?

Why are you doing this to me?

Do you know how awful this is, how much I am suffering?

We are in this together...I know you are here...I will wait for you.

What if we gave each other permission to be honest...to ask difficult questions...to wonder about things even when we don't really believe

them...to simply name honestly our pain without having to minimize or deny it?

What if we raised a generation to understand that they can do all of this in God's presence, in relationship with God, and that God is big enough to hear it and to be present with them?

What if we raised a generation who not only knew that about God, but who experienced that in community? What if we created communities where we can go honestly with and to each other with whatever brokenness we have? What if we created communities where our structures and systems could be counted on to bring healing and wholeness rather than adding to our ailments and brokenness? What if we created communities where we could safely and honestly hold together our grief and our gratitude, our brokenness and our wholeness? What if we could trust God and each other to be there when we need healing?

This is the time when you are invited to get out your psalm booklet. Turn to week 2 where you can again read the psalm. Then on the lined page, I invite you to write your own psalm in the spirit of Psalm 38. Where are you hurting, sick, broken? In light of that, what are the questions you have for God? What do you simply need to say aloud about your pain? Are you willing to allow God into all of this?

In these few moments you might only jot down a few notes. You might only think about how you are hurting or what you would say. But I encourage you over the coming week to spend a little time and to write your honest prayer, your honest song to God and invite God into the places that need healing. Amen.