

Nothing to Say

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Last Sermon as Pastor

Ravensworth Baptist Church

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Habakkuk 1:1–4, 2:1–4; Isaiah 1:10–18; Luke 1:9–10

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, we are people in need surrounded by people in need.

Some of us need a bit of hope to lighten the darkness of our despair.

Some of us need a word of encouragement to ease our sense of failure.

Some of us need more resources since there are times we have more month than money.

Some of us need a glimpse of a positive future because our present circumstances aren't positive at all.

Some of us need to find ways to reach out to help others. We are overwhelmed and paralyzed by the magnitude of needs we see.

Some of us need a medical diagnosis more positive than the one we fear.

Some of us need grace to remind us our sins don't speak our last word with God.

Some of us need to laugh more.

Some of us need food for our families, money to cover the rent, a few dollars for gasoline or the METRO.

Some of us need a few canned goods to tide us over until the next paycheck.

Some of us need a coat for winter, one more warm than stylish.

All of us need something and someone, O God. All of us need to do something for someone. All of us need to be someone for someone. All of us need to be willing to receive and give what someone might dare to share with us.

All of us need grace, mercy, compassion and love. All of us need the gifts you freely offer.

We lift our voices and hearts to you, O God, as we pray the prayer Jesus encouraged his needy disciples to pray.

Our Father, who art in heaven,

Hallowed be thy Name.

Thy Kingdom come.

Thy will be done on earth,

As it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses,

As we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,

But deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom,

And the power, and the glory forever.

Amen.

The side of the Green Line stop at L'Enfant Plaza where Susan and I stood was an ocean of red. Curly *W*'s decorated almost every cap, jacket or shirt as we waited for the next multi-car train to arrive. Folks stood eight or ten deep, staring at the empty track, waiting for the lights to blink on the floor indicating a train was approaching. When the doors opened people spilled out, not because they wanted to exit but because the cars were full and overflowing. Some folks waited as patiently as they could with that electric current of anticipation coursing through them causing them to twitch. Some pushed and shoved, wondering why folks couldn't move to the middle of the car, why they couldn't make room for just one more. All of this was taking place two hours before the first pitch would be thrown.

The red sea of fans never parted. Instead it coursed up escalators and stairs until it overflowed onto Half Street. Few folks dared to swim against the tide as it moved toward the ballpark where more lines and more delays awaited. *Tickets? Anybody got tickets?* folks shouted. *I got two seats, who wants them?* another voice called out.

I don't know what the average paid ticket price was for the World Series. I am sure it was more than \$200 per seat since standing room only tickets near game times were about \$1000 each. But at \$200 per seat with 40,000 people in attendance, \$8 million dollars would be a very low estimate of a single game's gate receipts.

As we made our way down Half Street vendors called out, reminding us peanuts and water bottles were far cheaper outside than inside the gates. Men and women who hoped to earn a little from the folks who had already paid so much hawked hats and shirts. A group of young men beat out rhythms on improvised percussion instruments hoping to drum up a few dollars. An older man backed up by the singers on his karaoke machine sang old hits as he held a guitar he rarely played. There was a bucket beside him seeded with a few bills in the hope they might multiply. A few folks in wheelchairs and in great need positioned themselves for maximum exposure with the crowd. A few needy men sat tiredly on seats made from buckets turned as upside down as their lives. Hand lettered signs spoke up for them attempting to explain what was beyond easy explanation and understanding. One of the men asked for loose change, jingling a cup with a few coins. Another, a veteran, he declared, said anything would help. Later during the game we would wave our caps to honor our service personnel, a gesture that didn't cost us much and didn't give them anything. The veteran on Half Street didn't need a tip of the cap; he needed a few bills to pay a few bills.

The voices of the needy were drowned out by the noise of the crowd and the words shouted through two amplified bullhorns. Two street evangelists told the crowd hell was waiting to consume them if they didn't turn to the teachings of the true God. They read scripture texts and offered commentary cajoling all who couldn't help but hear them to be followers of Christ. They pleaded for folks to give their lives to Jesus - to be baptized, to be saved. They didn't speak so much of the wonders of paradise as the horrors of hell. Tracts were distributed and littered the street. I have no doubt the two men were sincere in their beliefs and well meaning in their efforts. I never tried to speak with either of them. Frankly, I just wanted to get to a place where I couldn't hear them.

I didn't see either of the men offer anything to those who were begging outside the gates. Perhaps they thought like disciples before them that since they didn't have silver or gold to offer they'd offer the gospel instead. Perhaps they thought the needs of the spiritually impoverished multitude overshadowed the needs of the few financially impoverished beggars. Perhaps they had already given generously to those folks and I wasn't there to see it.

I have thought often about the incongruity of that moment – of all the money spent and about to be spent inside the gates, of two men preaching to a fan-filled congregation who had come to worship at the altar of a World Series rather than a church, of a small number of folks who had hands outstretched to a throng of people who had unloaded their bank accounts to get a seat or a ticket to stand and watch.

One evening, as we made our way back up Half Street, heads hung a bit low after a loss, I came across a folded five-dollar bill on the street. I picked it up and placed it in the cup of a man who gave me a wide smile. It was the only time I put money in anyone's cup, and that money wasn't even mine. I suppose it was good my hat had a Curly *W* and not a cross on the front. Unlike the street evangelists I was an unidentifiable Jesus-follower when I walked that street. Criticism for my lack of generosity didn't come from without but within.

When Jesus was asked what was most important aspect of being a person of faith he talked about loving God and neighbor and then defined neighbor in such a way it was clear he meant anybody and everybody, especially anybody and everybody in need. When Jesus' followers and detractors wondered how God would evaluate how people lived Jesus explained what mattered was how one treated the stranger, the homeless, the sick, hungry, and the naked. The way we treat others, especially those in need, indicates how we love God. I didn't love God very well on Half Street.

Actually, the notion of loving those who others treat as outcasts was part of what the prophets preached, too. Long before Jesus Isaiah gave that scathing sermon I read earlier. After worship that day I don't think anyone happily left the service. After the *Amen* Isaiah didn't tell the congregation to have a nice day. Instead he, a worship leader of sorts, told them how out of balance worship had become. After reading what Isaiah wrote there's really nothing much to say except that he's right, though I doubt he looked for confirmation. He wanted folks to realize loving God is about loving people. He said sacrifices are empty, as are meetings that serve no purpose other than having a meeting. Worship devoid of social awareness and social action is empty. Religion is not the goal. Serving others is the goal. Seeing God's countenance in every face is the goal. Treating each and every person with dignity and respect is the goal. Working for justice, helping the down-and-out, standing up for the homeless and going to bat for the defenseless – that's our calling. Caring for others is how salvation is expressed.

Habakkuk lived in a time and reminds us we live in a time when justice is in short supply, when truth is discounted, when anarchy and violence distort the faces of humanity. Habakkuk asks how long this ungodly time will last. The answer he receives doesn't provide a schedule. Instead the prophet hears God promise it will not last forever, that help is on the way.

I think the help that is coming and has come is the realization all of us are created equal, and all of us are bearers of the image of God no matter how we try to eradicate God's image from our countenance. Help comes when we begin to realize we are needy people in the midst of needy people. Help comes when we can clearly read we have a moral, ethical and spiritual responsibility to help those in genuine need.

I recently received a medicine for which I hoped my insurance provider would agree to provide. The medicine is extraordinarily expensive. I received my insurance report detailing who paid what and how much. The total for my medicine for one month was over \$19,000. I paid \$25, for which I am thankful. But what happens to those with my disease who have no insurance or too little insurance? What happens when co-pays exceed one's ability to pay? What happens to those who have no funds to pay at all? I am thankful and grateful for my insurance, but how is it right that others cannot afford their insulin, or their chemo treatments, or their rent, or their grocery bill? I don't have a clear answer but I am certain we must do what we can to help all who are in need. There are no strangers, there are no orphans, there are no outcasts of God – just children of God, like you and me.

A wee little man who thought himself an outcast, who those in his town considered an outcast, an extortionist, a sinner and a despicable person heard about Jesus and decided he wanted to see him. Being short of stature and strong of leg and arm he climbed into a tree for a better vantage point. Jesus spotted him, called out to him and invited himself to Zacchaeus' house. As Zacchaeus climbed down a roar went up criticizing Jesus for dining with the devil incarnate. Zacchaeus, overcome by Jesus' visit and, perhaps trying to describe himself in a more flattering way, said that he gave half of his income to the poor, and if he was caught cheating he paid quadruple damages. Perhaps the half to the poor was to compensate for the times he cheated and wasn't caught. With a smile on his face Jesus declared this marked salvation day for Zacchaeus' home! We don't know if Zacchaeus literally followed Jesus after that. We don't know if he gave his heart to Jesus, asked to be forgiven of his sins, was baptized and experienced the grace and mercy of God. Zacchaeus' thought he had done what was good and right by those who had too little. Jesus said, *Amen!* The Son of Man came to find and restore the lost. Apparently a great part of the restoration process is the restoration of kindness, compassion, and mercy to those who others overlook or ignore. Zacchaeus wasn't looking to be saved; Jesus wasn't trying to convince Zacchaeus of anything. Jesus affirmed what Zacchaeus said that's what salvation looked like.

We will gather food for ACCA throughout this month. Some will give throughout this year, and the next. It is good and right we do this. It is not enough. I doubt it ever will be. The folks on Half Street will be there next season. The people pacing the medians at our intersections aren't going away. Jesus said the poor will always be with us, but he didn't mean for us to throw up our hands and give up trying to eradicate poverty.

I need to do more. Perhaps you do, too. I have nothing much to say and a great deal more to do. Amen.

Postscript

In Luke's gospel Jesus says, *Give to everyone who begs from you. The Message translation puts the passage this way, If someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.*

I honestly don't know what to do each time I see an outstretched hand. I am convinced I need to do more than I am doing. Poverty's causes are complex - personal and systemic. Poverty's consequences always involve individuals. Individual expressions of generosity will not solve societal issues. Only changes of heart that bring about changes in legislation can begin to accomplish that.

Today is salvation day in this home, Jesus told the crowd. May we work for salvation day to come to our families, our communities, our nation and our world.

Gracious God, let us worship you by caring for those who believe no one cares. Amen.

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

The problem as God gave Habakkuk to see it:

*God, how long do I have to cry out for help
before you listen?*

*How many times do I have to yell, "Help! Murder! Police!"
before you come to the rescue?*

*Why do you force me to look at evil,
stare trouble in the face day after day?*

*Anarchy and violence break out,
quarrels and fights all over the place.*

Law and order fall to pieces.

Justice is a joke.

*The wicked have the righteous hamstrung
and stand justice on its head.*

What's God going to say to my questions? I'm braced for the worst.

I'll climb to the lookout tower and scan the horizon.

*I'll wait to see what God says,
how he'll answer my complaint.*

And then God answered: "Write this.

Write what you see.

*Write it out in big block letters
so that it can be read on the run.*

*This vision-message is a witness
pointing to what's coming.*

It aches for the coming—it can hardly wait!

And it doesn't lie.

If it seems slow in coming, wait.

It's on its way. It will come right on time.

*"Look at that man, bloated by self-importance—
full of himself but soul-empty.
But the person in right standing before God
through loyal and steady believing
is fully alive, really alive.*

Isaiah 1:10-18

The vision that Isaiah son of Amoz saw regarding Judah and Jerusalem during the times of the kings of Judah: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah.

Heaven and earth, you're the jury.

Listen to God's case:

*"I had children and raised them well,
and they turned on me.*

*The ox knows who's boss,
the mule knows the hand that feeds him,
But not Israel.*

My people don't know up from down.

*Shame! Misguided God-dropouts,
staggering under their guilt-baggage,
Gang of miscreants,
band of vandals—*

*My people have walked out on me, their God,
turned their backs on The Holy of Israel,
walked off and never looked back.*

*"Why bother even trying to do anything with you
when you just keep to your bullheaded ways?
You keep beating your heads against brick walls.*

*Everything within you protests against you.
From the bottom of your feet to the top of your head,
nothing's working right.*

*Wounds and bruises and running sores—
untended, unwashed, unbandaged.*

*Your country is laid waste,
your cities burned down.*

*Your land is destroyed by outsiders while you watch,
reduced to rubble by barbarians.*

Daughter Zion is deserted—

*like a tumbledown shack on a dead-end street,
Like a tarpaper shanty on the wrong side of the tracks,
like a sinking ship abandoned by the rats.*

*If God-of-the-Angel-Armies hadn't left us a few survivors,
we'd be as desolate as Sodom, doomed just like Gomorrah.*

*"Listen to my Message,
you Sodom-schooled leaders.*

Receive God's revelation,

you Gomorrah-schooled people.
"Why this frenzy of sacrifices?"
God's asking.
"Don't you think I've had my fill of burnt sacrifices,
rams and plump grain-fed calves?
Don't you think I've had my fill
of blood from bulls, lambs, and goats?
When you come before me,
who ever gave you the idea of acting like this,
Running here and there, doing this and that—
all this sheer commotion in the place provided for worship?"
"Quit your worship charades.
I can't stand your trivial religious games:
Monthly conferences, weekly Sabbaths, special meetings—
meetings, meetings, meetings—I can't stand one more!
Meetings for this, meetings for that. I hate them!
You've worn me out!
I'm sick of your religion, religion, religion,
while you go right on sinning.
When you put on your next prayer-performance,
I'll be looking the other way.
No matter how long or loud or often you pray,
I'll not be listening.
And do you know why? Because you've been tearing
people to pieces, and your hands are bloody.
Go home and wash up.
Clean up your act.
Sweep your lives clean of your evildoings
so I don't have to look at them any longer.
Say no to wrong.
Learn to do good.
Work for justice.
Help the down-and-out.
Stand up for the homeless.
Go to bat for the defenseless.

"Come. Sit down. Let's argue this out."
This is God's Message:
"If your sins are blood-red,
they'll be snow-white.
If they're red like crimson,
they'll be like wool.

Luke 19:1-10

Then Jesus entered and walked through Jericho. There was a man there, his name Zacchaeus, the head tax man and quite rich. He wanted desperately to see Jesus, but the crowd was in his way—he was a short man and couldn't see over the crowd. So he ran on ahead and climbed up in a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus when he came by.

When Jesus got to the tree, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, hurry down. Today is my day to be a guest in your home."

Zacchaeus scrambled out of the tree, hardly believing his good luck, delighted to take Jesus home with him. Everyone who saw the incident was indignant and grumped, "What business does he have getting cozy with this crook?"

Zacchaeus just stood there, a little stunned. He stammered apologetically, "Master, I give away half my income to the poor—and if I'm caught cheating, I pay four times the damages."

Jesus said, "Today is salvation day in this home! Here he is: Zacchaeus, son of Abraham! For the Son of Man came to find and restore the lost."