



The Only Safe Place for Hatred

TEXT
Psalm 137

February 19, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

I hate this psalm. But I must admit, sometimes I need it. The psalms are often turned to for comfort. The psalms are often turned to to give expression of praise to God. But Psalm 137 is a psalm of lament, a psalm written with the dust of exile caught in the throat.

Psalm 137 is a psalm giving voice to the suffering of God's people. The land of Israel was a holy gift. But the land was taken away. The Babylonians conquered the land; they razed the city of Jerusalem. They burned the temple. They gathered up the leaders of Israel, and they marched them east to Babylon. The children of Israel could work in Babylon. They could worship in Babylon. They could practice their culture. They just couldn't go home.

And so they wept. The psalms were meant to be sung, but we get the impression that this psalm was too hard to sing. The words stuck in their throats. Their captors taunted them: *Sing us one of the songs of Zion! Where is your God?*

Psalm 137 is a psalm of grief. If you have grieved, you know that grief is a long and sloppy walk. We can't always control our emotions. They seem too

big for our bodies. Not only does loss bring sadness, but loss sometimes brings a loss of perspective. What seemed right on another day now seems lacking. This is particularly true when we feel we have been wronged.

My friend Tom Long (I have mentioned him to you many times) was a teacher of preachers at Emory University. He tells of a time that, as he says, "he had a run-in with the law."¹ It turns out that he was crossing a few lanes of traffic in Atlanta, and the car in front of him stopped. He had the nose of the car in one lane, the tail of the car in another and a policemen right behind him. Tom got a ticket for impeding the flow of traffic.

He says, "As a young man, you get a ticket for speeding in a convertible, but when you are 60, you get a ticket for being in the way." He went to the library to look up the law. He decided he could make a case that he did not impede the flow of traffic. He found case law. He had a folder of information two inches thick. He was ready for his day in court.

His wife said, "Why are you putting all this effort into this? Just pay the ticket."

"Oh no, there is principle at stake here. I did not impede the

flow of traffic. I want my day in court."

He went to court, his name was called, and he grabbed his folder. The judge said, "The officer who gave you a ticket no longer works for the county. There is no one to bear witness against you; you are free to go."

Tom said, "Wait a minute. You can't just dismiss my case like that. I have a folder here. I've already planned to prove my innocence. You don't understand what has happened here. You can't just dismiss this."

When we feel we have been wronged, it's not so easy just to move along. We want things made right. We want the world to be made right. But sometimes things can't be made right.

Sometimes there is a hurt that cannot be healed; a wrong that cannot be made right. We can fight, we can beg, we can struggle, we can you plead, but there is not a blessed thing we can do to make things right. Have you known a sadness like that?

Sometimes the tears come, and it takes our voice away. The poets have not invented the vocabulary to express our own brokenness; so we weep. We weep because the world is not right. We weep because our hearts are broken. We weep because we

feel lost. How do you sing of God in a sadness like that?

When our only recourse is weeping, this psalm reminds us that God will catch our tears. But then this grief, as it sometimes does, turns to rage. Some have said the ending of the psalm is the lowest moral point in all of scripture.

Happy shall they be when they take your little ones and dash them against the rock! It's hard to read that in church. Oh my, this is hard. How can anyone in their right mind utter such prayers? These are unholy words. They are found in the Holy Book, but they are unholy words.

They may be unholy words, but they are honest words. If I understand the text, we have the unholy words so that when we are at our lowest, we may still find ourselves in this story of God — so that when we are a long way from holy, this prayer is our prayer. This prayer is unholy speech, but sometimes that is the best we can do.

I was serving a church in South Carolina when Billy came into my office. Billy worked for the State Law Enforcement Division. He was called to help find two little boys, one 3 years old, one 14 months old. They had been kidnapped in a carjacking in a small South Carolina town.

Billy said within ten minutes of his interviewing the mother of these little boys, he knew in his gut there had been no carjacking. They looked for days for a make-believe suspect, but in the end it came out: Susan Smith killed her own children.

Billy sat in my study and wept. "In a world where children should be loved and treasured, something like this will never make sense," he said. He and his wife had longed for a child and none would come. And now it was his job to interview this woman who had drowned her own children.

He told me, "Tom, there were times when I wanted to take this revolver and blow her away. Make her pay. Make her afraid like those little boys must have been terrified. Make her hurt like they had hurt."

I have never faced anything that dramatic, but I have witnessed wrong and injury, and I have gotten angry about it. I imagine you have too. We have those feelings of rage sometimes. We are not our best self, but sometimes it is the best we can do.

This is complicated because the truth is, when we have such feelings, our first response is often to deny them. We tell ourselves we don't feel the rage we feel. We push unseemly feelings down, pass them by. But that is dangerous practice — for those feelings of pain will erupt; they will come out and maybe they will do so in ways that cause damage to us, to those we love.

Thirty years ago, there was a movie *Kramer vs. Kramer*. Meryl Streep and Dustin Hoffman were Ted and Joanna Kramer. Joanna leaves Ted. He is left to raise their only son, Billy. Ted is abandoned, lonely, rejected and overwhelmed. There is a moment in the movie when he is making French toast for his son, and it

is obvious that he doesn't know how to do this. The truth is little Billy has spent more time in the kitchen watching his mother cook, and he knows dad doesn't know what he is doing. It's pretty funny until the French toast begins to burn, and Ted grabs a hot skillet, burns his hand, breakfast is on the floor and his rage at his wife erupts. He explodes.

In this moment, he looks into the eyes of his son and knows they have both just experienced a moment neither will forget.

We can pretend we don't have that kind of rage in us, but it will come out; and when it does, it may hurt us even more ... or those that we love.

Some make no effort to deny, and choose rather to give in to these feelings: striking back, striking out, making someone else pay; an eye for an eye.

If I understand it, this psalm has given us a third option. The teaching of the psalmist is that the healthiest thing, the most human thing is to bring our tears and our rage to God. The only safe place for hate is to bring it to God.

When we are at our worst, we give it over to God. We cannot always be holy before God, but we can always be honest. When we pray honest prayers to God, even if they are the lowest point of our hearts, God receives them. So when we want to bash someone against the rock, the best thing is to tell God we want to bash someone against the rock. Sometimes this is the best we can do.

Several years ago, Carol and I attended a dinner. It was a fun-

draiser, where the hosts invited us to attend. There I met Dennis Fritz. He was written about in John Grisham's only work of nonfiction, titled *The Innocent Man*.² It is the story of how Dennis Fritz was wrongly convicted of murder. I sat next to Dennis Fritz. As I visited with him, I wondered how I would handle being put in prison for a crime I had nothing, absolutely nothing to do with. I think I might go crazy.

Dennis was freed after 11 years in prison.

What I learned that night is that Dennis had left his hatred with God. That is the only safe place for hatred.

Happy are they who dash the little ones against the rock. There is nothing holy about this prayer; there is nothing holy about these words. But they are honest sometimes.

Every week we have a prayer of confession in this service. Most weeks you may not feel you need it. But when you do, know that this is the best place, this is the *only* place that it is safe to bring your anger, your hatred, your worst self. God can handle it. God will handle it.

I hate this psalm, but I am grateful to be reminded that with God, honesty is always welcomed.

¹Tom Long shared this story in the 2009 Tom Currie Lectures at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

²John Grisham, *The Innocent Man* (2006)

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.