

Integrity

Psalms 26 is one of those psalms that on the first reading makes me want to ask, why would anyone pray this? Because if you boil this prayer down to a few bullet points, and translate it into everyday language, this person basically says three things to the Lord:

1. Lord, I'm a good person.
2. Lord, I'm a good Christian – not only do I go to church every Sunday I actually like it!
3. Thank you, Lord, that I'm not like those other people!

You may remember a parable that Jesus told about a Pharisee who prayed things just like this (Luke 18:9-14). Needless to say, Jesus wasn't impressed.

So why would someone pray like this? The key is found in the first two words: "Vindicate me ...". This is a prayer of someone who felt that he was under attack. These are the words of someone who dares to pray out loud what all of us have probably felt on some sleepless night when we felt that way.

In his New York Times column this week David Brooks writes, "Today, the world feels like a hostile environment to. ... well ... everyone ... [W]e all tend to feel downtrodden these days. White males and Zionists feel victimized on campus. Christians feel oppressed by the courts. Women feel victimized in tech. The working class feels victimized everywhere. Even Taylor Swift apparently feels victimized by celebrity." It's also true, however, that we have allegiances to

many different groups at the same time—for instance, among other things, I'm a white, male, middle-class, highly educated, mostly rural, mainline Protestant Christian. But when any one of our many identities comes under attack, suddenly that becomes the one that matters most. (David Brooks, "In Praise of Equipose", New York Times, September 1, 2017)

And whenever we feel like we're under attack we tend to fall into a defensive mode. We instinctively try to justify ourselves—maybe in those internal conversations we have with ourselves inside our heads, or maybe by making our case to God.

All of this is to say that there are many reasons why anyone might feel under attack in today's world. But all of this reaches another level when those attacks become personal. And that's what Psalm 26 is about. The way the writer goes about making his case to the Lord leads me to believe that he is experiencing an attack on his character. The very first thing he speaks about is his integrity. Even when it get personal, there may be a lot of things that we can put up with, but when someone questions our integrity that cuts a lot deeper than most.

As most of you know I've had a connection with Habitat for Humanity going back almost twenty years, first in Northern NY and now here in Dixon. And for most of that time my particular niche in Habitat's work has been serving on the Family Selection Committee—which is exactly what it sounds like. We're the group that advertises for applicants, reads and evaluates the applications, and

then recommends candidates to our board of directors. Our homeowners are Habitat what is all about, so making good choices is paramount. It also comes with some built in ethical guideline, since Habitat is governed by same privacy and nondiscrimination laws that realtors and banks must follow.

I served as the committee chairperson during the very first family selection for Champlain Valley Habitat for Humanity, and among our very first round of applicants was a man who was especially difficult. He challenged our process at every step along the way—and not in a very nice way. Ultimately, for a number of reasons, we selected someone else for our first home. But practically as soon as the denial letters went out my phone rang—and you can guess who was on the other end. He launched into a long tirade about how we had discriminated against him because he was disabled, and he threatened to sue us.

Being a complete neophyte at such things I had two immediate reactions. The first was fear that we had somehow really messed up, that we would end up in court, and even if we were vindicated the bad publicity would put us out of business before we even began. But the second reaction was the anger that comes when a person feels that his integrity has been called into question. And so there were a lot of those sleepless conversations inside my head. Ultimately, after the man blew off his steam he went away. It took a bit longer for the accusing voices in my head to stop, though.

As our writer makes his case to the Lord, we gain an important insight into the roots of integrity—how our characters are formed. And it has a lot to do with the influences we invite into our lives. First he puts in negative terms, in verses 4 and 5.

I do not sit with the worthless,
nor do I consort with hypocrites;
I hate the company of evildoers,
and will not sit with the wicked

This can be a tough lesson for many people to learn. It's the sort of wisdom that parents and grandparents try to pass along, and one of the major themes of teenage rebellion. Now it's true that there are times when we don't even have much choice about who associate with—we don't get to choose our families or co-workers. Paul concedes this in 1 Corinthians. He says that if we were to totally avoid “the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters ... [we would] need to go out of the world.” (1Corinthians 5:10) We may not always be able to choose the people around us, but we do have choice over who we allow to *influence* us.

The flip side of this consists of the positive influences we intentionally seek out. And here our writer tells about going around the Lord's altar, singing aloud a song of thanksgiving and telling of his wonderful deeds. This is also about the kind of company we keep. There are no guarantees in this, either, of course. It's sad but true that the church has its hypocrites and self-righteous Pharisees, and immoral people. But to the extent that the church is faithful to the Word and the

Spirit, living in the company of God's people will plant and nourish the seeds of integrity in our lives.

The word “integrity” is the key to understanding the message of this psalm. I intentionally chose to read the New Revised Standard Version this morning because the NIV makes a very unfortunate choice: It translates the beginning of the psalm this way: Vindicate me, LORD, for I have led a blameless life.” Integrity is a better translation of the Hebrew, and being a person of integrity is not the same as leading a blameless life.

If this is literally a “Psalm of David,” then David is a prime example of this. Scripture celebrates David as a “man after [God's] heart” (Acts 13:22, 1 Samuel 13:14). But Scripture also tells the story of David's life, so we know that at times his conduct was far from blameless. However, we also know that in David's great times of moral failure his heart turned him back to God. The Bible's greatest prayer of penitence, Psalm 51 is also a “Psalm of David” and its heading says that it is “A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.” (Psalm 51:1) His integrity wasn't found in his moral perfection—it was in his moral compass that always led him back to the Lord.

Even here in Psalm 26, as David defends his integrity he asks the Lord to test his heart and mind. It's that which keeps this prayer from being a self-righteous rant of a man who sees himself as a victim.

At the end of the day what allows us to stand at those times when our character is called into question, or when we are attacked for any aspect of who we are, is a clear knowledge of who we really are in the eyes of God. That core identity doesn't depend on what other people think of me, or any group I belong to—not even being a Christian, if calling myself that means that I see myself as part of some special privileged tribe among all the tribes of this world. Where I find my identity, the thing that is the source of my integrity, is in what God thinks of me.

And that doesn't depend on me! David prays to the Lord, "For your steadfast love is before my eyes, and I walk in faithfulness to you." In the assembly of God's people he tells of the Lord's wonderful deeds. In this time of trouble he depends on the Lord's grace and mercy. That is what enables him to regain his balance when his character is called into question.

Where do you find your balance? What is the source of your integrity?

Amen.

*Rev. David Spaulding
First Presbyterian Church, Dixon
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