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Waterford Mennonite Church
October 28, 2018
Psalm 85

Today we conclude our fall worship series on conflict and reconciliation. Throughout this series we have been utilizing the book *Reconcile* by John Paul Lederach. This morning we want to delve into Psalm 85 and the four significant concepts of Truth, Mercy, Justice, and Peace.

All of prayers and songs of Psalms are put into different categories. So for example there are hymns, songs of trust, songs of thanksgiving, and royal psalms. Almost 40% of all the psalms are considered prayers of lament. Within laments we find some psalms are personal laments, while others are considered a community lament. Well our text for today, Psalm 85, is considered a community lament.

“The biblical tradition of lament includes those prayers and expressions of complaint, anger, grief, despair, and protest to God.”ⁱ Laments encapsulate the wide range of human emotions and offers a prayer of protest to God. However, a “lament is distinguished from mere complaint as it screams out the troubles and moves to some expression of confidence and assurance of being heard by God.”ⁱⁱ I have really appreciated how Old Testament scholar Kathleen O’Conner describes laments. She writes this: Laments

Erupt from wounds, burst out of unspeakable pain, and bring it to language... They take anger and despair before God and community. They grieve. They argue. They find fault... Although laments appear disruptive of God’s world, they are acts of fidelity. In vulnerability and honesty, they cling to God and demand for God to see, hear, and act... they also express faith in God in the midst of chaos, doubt, and confusion.ⁱⁱⁱ

I suspect that within our personal journeys of conflict and reconciliation we each have had reason at some point to pray our own prayers of laments. In the midst of conflict and in the midst of our deep desire for reconciliation we can see and name areas of brokenness within and

without. Our emotions flood us, our vision of God's presence might become blurry, and we are driven to our knees to cry out to God a prayer of protest and lament.

Today's psalm is classified as a community lament. Most likely the context of the psalm is the return of the Jewish exiles from Babylon following the edict of the Persian King Cyrus in 538 BC. Perhaps you are wondering why then they are not now singing a song of thanksgiving instead of praying a community lament? Well their return does speak of God's faithfulness and forgiveness. However, they returned home and home was no longer the same. They faced devastation, destruction, and drought.

In the beginning of this psalm the community recounts God's mercies and how God had shown favor to the land and restored the good fortunes of Jacob. They retell how God had forgiven the sins of the people and turned away from God's own anger. In a way they are reminding God of some of the myriad of ways that God has been faithful to God's people. And then in verse four they cry out to God - "Restore us *again*, God our Savior." And in verse seven "Show us your unfailing love, Lord, and grant us your salvation."

In their cries of lament we hear their unrest, their pain, their sorrow, and their fears. They retell what God has done as if to confirm to themselves and to their God that God surely cannot be finished with them yet! So come God, hear us, restore to us, be present in the midst of our prayers of lament. This is one of the true gifts of the Psalms. They give us words to grasp to help articulate the depth of our anguish, anger, and hopeful anticipation. Nothing is held back within the psalms, there is no emotion too great that has been excluded.

If you were to study the entire grouping of biblical laments you would quickly notice that there is a typical pattern that emerges for the laments. There is often an address to God, followed by the complaint, confession of trust, petition, words of assurance, and ending with a vow of

praise or thanksgiving.^{iv} However, if you look at our text for today you will quickly see that it does not follow the typical format for a biblical lament. It includes an address to God, followed by the complaint, a petition, and a confession of trust in the beginning of verse 8. However, we feel an abrupt shift happen in the middle of verse 8.

We are reminded that the book of Psalms was in fact the hymnbook and the prayer book of God's people. It captures a significant look into their lives as followers of God and as ones who actively engaged in corporate worship. So if we picture Psalm 85 occurring within the corporate worship we can begin to see how verses 8b-13 could in fact be delivered by a different voice. In this case it is known as an *oracle of salvation*. So, "there is reason to believe that at a certain moment in the service, a member of the Temple personnel, a priest or perhaps a prophet, announced an "oracle of salvation" that assured (them) of God's grace and favor."^v

Here in our text this oracle of salvation is profound in both its scope as well as its message, reading again beginning in verse 8:

God promises peace to God's people, God's faithful servants – but let them not turn to folly.
Surely God's salvation is near those who fear God, that God's glory may dwell in our land.
Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other.
Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven.
The Lord will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest.
Righteousness goes before him and prepares the way for his steps.

"The salvation oracle... declares that God's salvation is near and points to a vision of reconciliation and harmony hardly found elsewhere in Scripture."^{vi} It "speaks to the mystery of God's reconciliation and the partnering of heaven and earth."^{vii} This salvation oracle was relevant for those just returning from exile, and it continues to be relevant for us today.

In his book *Reconcile* John Paul Lederach shares about how this salvation oracle has impacted his life and his ministry in reconciliation. He writes

In the literal translation, which captured my attention, the psalmist says in Psalm 85:10: “Truth and Mercy have met together. Justice and Peace have kissed.” In these two short lines are four important concepts and two powerful paradoxes. The concepts kept dancing through my mind as I watched the peace process unfold in fits and starts. For the first time, I noticed that the psalmist seems to treat the concepts as if they are alive... I could hear their voices in any conflict. Truth, Mercy, Justice, and Peace were no longer just ideas. They became people, and they could talk.^{viii}

A couple weeks ago during a sermon I challenged us all to increase our ability to listen to ourselves, others, and to God. As we considered strengthening our listening skills I shared about the value of using a personality inventory, such as DiSC. Perhaps you remember how I presented a chart that describes these four different personality types, and what is important to each of them in the midst of conflict. So for example, the various quadrants are driven by different motives and hold different fears as the individuals find themselves within a conflict. In a similar way within a conflict we hold different perspectives on the value and role of Truth, Mercy, Justice, and Peace. In fact we can begin to treat them like bickering siblings at best, and at worse as competitors in a boxing match.

Psalm 85 has been designated an appropriate psalm to be read on Christmas Eve. Like those in the context of Psalm 85, we too stand in the middle of “salvation at hand” and a vision of “salvation yet to be.” In the midst of conflict and our desire for reconciliation we recall the ways God has been at work in the past and the ways we are praying that God will be at work now and in the future. Every year during Advent we announce the ways God is present and join together to wait expectantly for God to come and be revealed in new ways. The salvation oracle in Psalm 85 helps us envision a beautiful picture that one day will be fulfilled – “Truth and mercy have met together. Justice and Peace have kissed.”

In Lederach's extensive research, travel, and leadership within the realm of conflict and reconciliation he has discovered the significance of this powerful oracle of salvation in Psalm 85. In his book he recalls an experience of dividing "leaders and pastors (in Nicaragua) into four small groups designated respectively as Truth, Mercy, Justice, and Peace. (Then he) asked each group to treat the concept as a person and to ask one question: What is Truth (or Mercy, Justice, Peace) most concerned about in the midst of a conflict?"^{ix} Lederach then took his various experiences with this exercise and created a liturgy that brings these four concepts - Truth, Mercy, Justice, Peace – together for an insightful dialogue.

In just a moment we are going to hear Lederach's liturgy as presented by Anne, Steve, Andrew, Melanie, and Carolyn. In the words of the drama we will hear once again the vital role that each of these – Truth, Mercy, Justice, Peace – carry in the dance and journey of reconciliation. Our calling today is to see the value that each of these play in our lives, and in our various contexts when we find ourselves in conflict. We need each of them in our lives, we are not asked to pick and choose from them. For example, "We are not asked to choose between rain or sunshine. Each is different, but both are needed for sustaining life and growth. Such is the case with Truth and Mercy, Justice and Peace."^x

ⁱ Bob Yoder, *Helping Youth Grieve: The Good News of Biblical Lament* (Resource Publications: Eugene, Oregon), 9.

ⁱⁱ Yoder, *Helping Youth Grieve*, 9.

ⁱⁱⁱ Yoder, *Helping Youth Grieve*, 21.

^{iv} Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today* (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, Kentucky), 62-64.

^v Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, 99.

^{vi} James H. Waltner, *Psalms: Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Herald Press: Scottsdale, Pennsylvania), 413.

^{vii} Waltner, *Psalms*, 416.

^{viii} John Paul Lederach, *Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press), 84-85.

^{ix} Lederach, *Reconcile*, 85.

^x Lederach, *Reconcile*, 92.