

Sermon

Our lives are complex. To be sure, this is a sentiment I think each of us can resonate with, almost to point of its being obvious. When we look at our own lives, we can see the trails of accomplishments and experiences, disappointments and joys that have led us to be the people we are today; defined not by singular actions or what other's might think of us but by a life lived richly for better or worse. Yet while it might be obvious to say that our lives are complex, I think it would also be obvious to say people have a proclivity towards oversimplification. We live in a society where many find it easy to name immigrants as rapists, thieves, and bad hombres just as many may find it easy to denigrate others less enlightened with the derogative, "trump voter". Looking to newspapers, tv, the radio, and podcasts which shout generalizations like "those Christians, those Muslims, those immigrants, those conservatives or those liberals" we can be given a humble reminder of how difficult it can be to imagine others complexly.

Yet even as we may struggle to honor the fullness of others, and despite what I said first about our having complex lives, I think we may also struggle to imagine ourselves complexly. To quote Garrison Keillor from a prairie home companion, "people all over the country are angry at themselves for not being smart enough, or skinny enough, or rich enough, or sexy enough." His list of self-condemnations could go on and include each personal demon with which we each struggle. Too often, I think we define ourselves by our self-perceived failures or successes alone.

I think our need to be seen, fully and complexly rather than simply as our flaws, is what the psalmist speaks to in his image of the Lord who is our Shepherd, as presented in his most famous 23rd Psalm. It's an image seen again and again throughout the Bible, including in today's Gospel reading of the good shepherd. Yet I believe the twenty third psalm's presentation holds special significance for its readers because of how applicable it can be. It speaks to the days in which the Lord makes us to lie down in green pastures and leads us beside still waters. It also speaks to those days wherein we traverse dark valleys. That presence of the Good Shepherd which sees us both in dark valleys and pleasant pastures is I think what had made the psalm so meaningful for so many and why it is read during some of most trying times in people's lives.

In my own work as a chaplain, I have read the twenty third psalm at virtually every death, anointing, and funeral I have attended because of its ability honor the difficulty of those facing

loss. But I will say that there is one particular memory I associate with the twenty third psalm. It's a memory of a story takes place on the labor & delivery unit in a hospital where I learned as a student chaplain. It was a place which saw the highest of highs and the lowest of lows: a place where parents celebrated miracle children born from pregnancies parents never thought they could have yet also a place where mothers and fathers faced high risk pregnancies and the fears surrounding very sick newborns. It was a place blessed with capable and loving staff including doctors, nurses, aides, and environmental services workers. It was a place blessed with wonderful patients and family members, broken in their own ways as they sought healing in this place yet also more often than not brimming with love for their children and the people seeking to help them in spite of the awful circumstances which brought the families to the hospital in the first place.

It was certainly awful circumstances that brought one particular mother, a woman whom I will call Margaret, the labor and delivery unit. You see, Margaret had arrived in order that she might be induced to deliver a 28 week old daughter who had died in utero. What made matters worse, Margaret's daughter had died two weeks prior to the day I met her. You see she could not be induced because her meager insurance had not yet kicked in to cover the cost. For a young Latina woman working at a minimum wage job, finding a means to cover this procedure was a great difficulty. I would also like to mention as an aside that I truly wonder how the bill recently passed at the House of Representatives would have helped a woman like Margaret in her circumstances.

These were the facts I was given by the nurse as I prepared to enter the room. There I found Margaret, her husband, and three children, the oldest of which was about 12 and the youngest about 3. I went on to spend about seven hours over the course of three days with the family. During the first day, the shock of the situation seemed to define the room. Margaret told me of her life: working at Dunkin Donuts and the frustrations of dealing with the induction. She spoke of her fear of the situation and her sadness. I too was afraid. I was still fairly new to chaplaincy, this being about my second month on the job and I felt unsure of how to best support Margaret, afraid of saying the wrong thing or invading her privacy during one of the most vulnerable times of her life. The circumstances provoked me to consider only how awful the situation was.

And so you can imagine how surprised I was to find myself laughing as hard as I could on the second day. In spite of the situation's gravity, Margaret and her husband cracked jokes as they talked about their family softball league and how ridiculous her dunkin donuts job could be. They talked about how their home had been used as a set for the television show, Chicago Fire, a year past, and how they had been moved to beautiful apartment for the days the crew spent filming. Her young son talked to me about his favorite super-heroes from the avengers and the oldest daughter played with her shopkins with me, little toys based on foods like cookies and apples. Margaret spoke proudly of her three children and showed me the back of her neck where she had tattooed all of their names.

But by the third day, the laughter had ceased. I was paged on my hospital beeper because Margaret had delivered her daughter. I arrived to find Margaret weeping, her husband holding her arm and their own parents looking after their children. Margaret held her daughter, a beautiful girl, as I read the twenty third psalm and proceeded to baptize the baby. By the end of the small service, Margaret had ceased weeping. I prepared my things to leave, to give them space in which to say good bye to this child. But before I left, Margaret called me over. She leaned forward and pointed to the back of her neck, below where the names of her other children were written. "Her name will go here." She told me and smiled.

Margaret and her family, were certainly in the valley of the shadow of death. They faced the dark consequences of our health care system's inability to care for her and the catastrophic loss of baby girl. Yet, in spite of that darkness so bleak I can hardly fathom, they illustrated that rarely are there never green pastures and still waters within that shadowed valley. Because within that space of tears and grief, of loss and lost potential, Margaret and her family also held reverent celebration of what that daughter would always mean. Those three days witnessed true sadness accompanied by stories of softball games and children's toys, loving parents holding one another and their children. To quote Garrison Keillor again, "no matter who we are, each of us will have our share of sorrow, we can't outsmart life, we can't avoid it each of us will have our share of sorrow and a little bit more. But when we come to the end, and to the last judgement, we are all equal and all naked together before God, all of us without exception, and so because that day comes quickly, we want to enjoy what is truly best." And that is stories of family softball games, playing with children's toys, and laughing about stupid jobs. The twenty third psalm, like Margaret's story, reminds us that no matter what dark valley we enter, the Lord is with us. That our lives are not to be categorized and labeled as simplistically sad or happy, bad or good in the same way that people in our society are not to be labeled by single identities based in

religion, nationality, political affiliation, gender, race, or sexual orientation. The twenty-third psalm reminds us that all people, including ourselves, are meant to be viewed in fullness and that when we cannot help but view the world simplistically, overshadowed by darkness and fear, we are led by a God who will remind us that there are green pastures. And that we are more complex and good, than we may know. Amen.