

The Faithfulness of God

by Rev. Joseph Connolly

“Your favor, O *Yahweh*, is not exhausted, / nor has the compassion of God failed.” — Lamentations 3:22.

I have probably said about 150 times from the pulpit that I grew up Roman Catholic. I have probably said at least as often I shifted to the Episcopal tradition and then, perhaps under the influence of a certain Congregationalist whom I married, shifted yet again.

Something I have said, probably with equal frequency is my Mother, when she was very young, joined the convent but left before taking final vows, after which she married my Father. My Father taught at a Jesuit School for his entire career. And I have probably said this about 150 times. It is fair to say I went into the family business because of that background I just outlined.

But something else I've said (perhaps with less frequency or not clearly enough) is I have been a church person my whole life. But that is not just that I hang out in churches or with church people. I was involved. So I want to tell a story about being involved when I was in my teens, active in the Roman tradition.

First some background: Catholic youngsters participate in what is called “First Communion,” generally in the Second grade. In that tradition it is said the first time to receive Communion is when a child has reached what the Church calls the age of reason.

That is defined as being able to have some concept of what's happening with and in the Sacrament and what that might mean. Generally, the rule the church works by says one is likely to be able to reason enough to comprehend these things around the age of seven or eight— hence, once children reach the second grade.

Given the complexities of Roman dogma— transubstantiation and all that— one needs to get some instruction. And those children who attend parochial school get instruction, lots of it.

But Catholic students who attend public school do not. Hence, they need to go to classes set up just for them.

And so, in my late teens I was recruited by a nun to be an instructor for Second Grade students who attended public school. I suspect the nun was trying to introduce me to a girl was also in her late teens whom she had also recruited for this same assignment. We taught together.

But my interest was the teaching assignment. What can I say? I guess I have always had a focused theological bent.

To be clear, these classes do not actually help second graders understand the aforementioned theological complexities like transubstantiation. Quite the contrary, the way the Roman Church accomplishes this educational task is to have these young people memorize questions and answers found in *The Baltimore Catechism*.

We Protestants should not hold our nose at the thought of children memorizing questions and answers in a Catechism. Be it here known Martin Luther, himself, wrote *Luther's Small Catechism* meant for the training of young children.

And so, all that comes back to the reality of my involvement. In my late teens I was teaching second grade

students. That is being involved not just in the church but in community as well. And I know: some of you probably have a hard time picturing me teaching students in the Second Grade. (Slight pause.)

Now, there's another aspect of my early life I've often mentioned here. I've said— "Hey, I'm a street kid from Brooklyn." I would be the first to admit despite a less than bucolic childhood I was afforded some extraordinary opportunities when I was a child. I've spoken about some of them.

On the other hand and for instance, I was witness to a mugging at a very young age. A regular occurrence in my neighborhood was, just for fun, someone would pour gasoline into a street corner mail box and then flip in a lit cigarette.

There was a newspaper stand in my neighborhood which was open from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. only. Newspaper stand open from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. only? And often a police car was parked in front of it. It was not a really a newspaper stand.

In street parlance that was a wire room. It took bets on horse races. The police— they were on the take— and they were there to protect it. I could go on but you get the picture— the neighborhood I lived in.

And yet... and yet... despite all that strangeness in my life I also seemed to have this interest in God. And it was a significant enough interest that a nun recognized it and recruited me to teach second grader students when I was still a teen. (Slight pause.)

We find these words in the work known as Lamentations: "Your favor, O *Yahweh*, is not exhausted, / nor has the compassion of God failed."

In my letter to the church in the Newsletter which went out Friday— so unless you just picked up a copy in the hall you probably have not yet seen it— in that letter I said if you're paying any attention to the news, one can readily argue we live in difficult times when it comes to many ethical issues, especially racism. And yes, one could readily argue we humans have always lived in difficult times when it comes to ethical behavior.

I also said many have explored the myriad of social issues, ethical issues, concerning the broken-ness of our society. If that broken-ness is not self-evident, you are not looking. Hence, we live with the conflicted-ness of that. (Slight pause.)

The writer of this passage is obviously conflicted. The words I quoted which praise the compassion of God are in the Twenty-second verse. But later verses talk about burdens and yokes and insults and being struck. (Slight pause.)

The connection I want to make here is given the sense of conflicted-ness I outlined about my early life and what this passage from Lamentations says I want to suggest life, itself, is much more complex and conflicted than we want to admit. And our life with God is much more complex and conflicted than we want to admit.

Equally, there is a simple premise we offer and claim about God and it is straightforward. God is with us— Emmanuel— God is with us, no matter what the circumstance— case closed.

That does not mean we will avoid the myriad of issues which surround us— issues from racism to sexism to economic domination to ageism to militarism, etc., etc., etc. It means we must engage them.

And yes, it probably means things may not always go the way we had planned, wanted, hoped. But the promise

of Scripture still insists God will be and is with us as we experience the conflicted-ness of life.

And so as you heard, what gives the speaker in this passage hope is the fidelity and mercy of *Yahweh*, God. The writer clearly says the steadfast love of *Yahweh* never ceases; the mercy of God never comes to an end; these are new every morning.

In its poetics of encirclement, the poem frames conflict with merciful fidelity, proclaims a God of hope. And our claim is that what we call hope in God is merely a description of a God who encircles us with divine mercy. (Slight pause.)

Here is something I don't think I've said often enough from the pulpit. We live in an age of empire. Jesus lived in an age of empire but was not a part of empire. And it was Rome— not the Jews— but Rome, the Empire, who killed Jesus. So Jesus lived with this conflict: living in empire but not a part of empire.

Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in the Fourth and Fifth Century, also lived in an age of empire. But by then the church was a part of empire.

However, as was true of Jesus, Augustine was not enamored of empire and lived in that conflict. So perhaps the question for us is what does it mean to live, as did Augustine, in this age of empire, in this conflict? (Slight pause.)

Theologian Walter Brueggemann says every agent of empire wants to reduce what is possible to what is available. Brueggemann also insists the Biblical image of Pharaoh is a metaphor which gets repeated over and over and over in all Scripture.

Pharaoh embodies and represents raw, absolute, worldly power. Pilate and Pharaoh alike are just stand-ins for empire, agents for brut force. They appear and reappear in many different personae throughout Scripture. And these agents of empire work against the possibilities God insists are present for us. (Slight pause.)

That being said, I think this is the point I take from today's passage: life is lived in conflict. That is a given. We need to grapple with it.

Why? The vision God has for us is a vision enfolded in steadfast love. Steadfast love is something for which empire would never allow. (Long pause.)

I wonder why— why empire wouldn't allow for that? Well, let me come back to Walter Brueggemann. He says this (quote:) "Hope does not need to silence the rumblings of crisis to still be hope." — "*Hope does not need to silence the rumblings of crisis to still be hope.*" And our hope is not in empire. That is a foolish hope. Our hope is in God— God Who *is* faithful. Amen.

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United Church of Christ, First Congregational, Norwich, NY

ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: "Let me come back to Walter Brueggemann again. (Quote:) 'Sabbath is not about worship. It is about work stoppage. It is about withdrawal from the anxiety system of Pharaoh. Sabbath is a refusal to let one's life be defined by production and consumption and the endless pursuit of private well-being' (unquote). Sabbath is, therefore, not self centered. It is neighbor centered, community centered. Looking out for self, not for neighbor, an activity of empire. And involvement in the community,

with neighbor, is an expression of hope.”

BENEDICTION: Let us place our trust in God. Let us go from this place to share this Good News: by God we are blessed; in Jesus, the Christ, the beloved of God, we are made whole. Let us depart in confidence and joy that the Spirit of God is with us and let us carry Christ in our hearts for God is faithful. Amen.