

**St. Timothy's Lutheran Church**  
**Pastor Jonna Bohigian**

**January 14, 2018**  
**Psalm 78:1-7**

### **Tell the Next Generation**

Alek and I had just started dating. Our dating relationship had grown out of a friendship relationship and we both felt that we had nothing to prove to one another. We were who we were; take it or leave it. As a result, we were honest with one another – sometimes brutally honest.

One evening, I told Alek that I was angry. I was *very* angry with someone in the church. So angry, my blood felt like it boiled. Instead of consoling me or giving me advice on how to deal with this person, Alek looked at me and instead said, “You’re angry with *God*, aren’t you?”

No one had ever asked me that question before. I immediately felt vulnerable and fearful that perhaps this was true. But I couldn’t see how I *could* be angry with God; I didn’t blame *Him* for this person’s cruelty. So I responded with my rational thought, “God isn’t *causing* this person to be cruel, so I’m not angry with God.”

“But aren’t you though? God isn’t *causing* this, but He *is* allowing it. Think about it. It might relieve you to discover that you *are* angry with God. You can tell Him about it and then you can let it go. It’s been helpful for me in the past.”

I did not want to admit that what he said made a lot of sense. If God allowed this cruelty, I was *absolutely* angry with Him. I thought that I had never been angry with God before, and I wore it as a badge of honor. I feared that if I were angry with God, I might not be a very “good” Christian. In the church, those who do not get angry with God or ask “why” seem to be *commended*, as if they are somehow much

better than the rest of us. But Alek's comment gave me permission. Permission to be angry with God, permission to ask the honest questions.

I lay in bed that night and presented myself before God. I told Him that maybe I *was* angry with Him for allowing this cruelty in my life. I told Him I was angry for not protecting me. I cried as I said these things to God, *and* felt such a relief. I could let it go. I had not known what relief I could experience by telling God I was angry with Him.

I have well-intentioned friends who have chosen *not* to tell their children about their pasts or their struggles. They do not want to lower the respect their children have of them, or ought to have of them, so they do not share their sins, anger, or *humanity* with their children. They cannot see what good might be gained from remembering and telling the next generation, and so they have chosen to *protect* their children from the past.

I thank God that this is not what the Scripture writers chose to do! We read time and time again of *failure*, of flawed characters who cause incredible pain and who experience incredible pain, and yet who are *examples* for us.

Please turn to our sermon text, Psalm 78, found on page 579 in your pew Bibles. In our reading this morning, we read the author asking the people to hear and obey him, to share the story with the next generation that had been passed on to them. Verse 4: "We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done." God gave the law and decreed statutes. Verse 6: "So that the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their

children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands. They would not be like their forefathers – a stubborn and rebellious generation, whose hearts were not loyal to God, whose spirits were not faithful to him” (Ps 78:6 – 8).

The psalter continues with stories of the people’s lack of obedience after God delivered them from slavery in Egypt, and their lack of obedience when they got into the Promised Land. He *wants* the people to know, to tell their children who will tell *their* children of the *failures* of their people. The failures of their forefathers, God’s wrath *and* His mercy to them. Verse 35: “They remembered that God was their Rock, that God Most High was their Redeemer. But then they would flatter him with their mouths, lying to him with their tongues; their hearts were not loyal to him, they were not faithful to his covenant. Yet he was merciful; he forgave their iniquities and did not destroy them. Time after time he restrained his anger and did not stir up his full wrath. He remembered that they were but flesh, a passing breeze that does not return. How often they rebelled against him in the desert and grieved him in the wasteland!” (Ps 78:35 – 40). The people fail time and time again, rebelling against God. God responds with anger and then with mercy.

The psalm ends with God’s provision and mercy. Verse 70: “He chose David his servant and took him from the sheep pens; from tending the sheep he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel his inheritance. And David shepherded them with integrity of heart; with skillful hands he led them” (Ps 78:70 – 72).

The psalter does not simply want the people to tell the next generation about *God*; he wants the people to tell the next generation about the *failures* of their forefathers *and* about God's power and wonders, so that the next generation would "put their trust in God and would not forget [God's] deeds but would keep his commands" (Ps 78:7).

Church, it does us *no good* to act as if we are a bunch of saints. As Martin Luther once wrote, evangelism is "one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread."<sup>1</sup> We are *all* beggars. In another analogy, "The church is not a museum of saints, but a hospital for sinners." Pope Francis was quoted in an interview saying, "The thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the Church as a field hospital after battle."<sup>2</sup>

If we are not honest about the church and about ourselves, we will *not* encourage young people to live godly lives, but we will *discourage* them. When young people see others who act as if they are perfect, they may respond in a couple ways: 1. They see the flaws, the sin, in *themselves* and become *discouraged* that they will never be as "good" as those Christians or, 2. They see the sin in the church and

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<sup>1</sup><https://books.google.com/books?id=wE8xDwAAQBAJ&pg=PA202&lpg=PA202&dq=martin+luther+%2B+one+beggar+telling+another+beggar+where+to+find+bread&source=bl&ots=-4wLE5KrRE&sig=haC-GIGSnR0M-MufEOGak-nUeI&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj5oN2yrtPYAhVY-2MKHYkECaAQ6AEIazAP#v=onepage&q=martin%20luther%20%2B%20one%20beggar%20telling%20another%20beggar%20where%20to%20find%20bread&f=false>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/parish-diary/church-should-be-hospital-sinners>

are acutely aware of the hypocrisy they see, because they *know* that we *all* are human and flawed.

In 2011, Drs. Kara Powell and Chap Clark conducted a large-scale research project on the “stickiness” of faith in young people. In their research, they discovered that after entering college, 1 in 2 young people did not practice their faith. A quarter of them would return to an active faith later in life, which was encouraging. But was it simply left up to chance or to the type of university they attended after high school? Their results concluded with a resounding, “No!” Those who had an active faith after high school had on average of 5 Christian adults investing in their lives. These young people also didn’t view their faith as a jacket that they would simply put on and take off, but as a part of *who* they were. Faith was *real* to them, and able to handle the questions and hardships of life.

Dear friends, be encouraged! The way to the heart of young people and to encourage their faith is *not* to be perfect! It is to be *you*; to share the joys and tragedies of life; to share your struggles, your anger with God; to be *real*. We do not share a gospel that proclaims that people ought to be like us because we have all the answers but to follow the One *we* follow, because we *can’t* do it correctly or perfectly, no matter *how* hard we try.

We are all, every one of us, in process. From the youngest of us to the oldest of us. This is one of the reasons I love doing visitation, particularly with those who are older. There is no pretense. There is no reason to cover doubts, to try to look good, or to avoid conversations.

One of my favorite visitations from St. Timothy's was with Dee Abeloe. She asked me to share her story and of God's faithfulness to her, as often as I could. It is in honor and loving memory of her that I share her story with you.

Dee and her sister had been estranged for many years. When she was placed on hospice one of the final times, her family had a conversation regarding who would stay by Dee's side, day after day. By complete surprise to everyone, her sister volunteered for the job.

Dee once told me that she didn't know *why* God kept her alive. She felt ready to leave this earth and had lived her life. *But*, perhaps God gave her this time to reconcile with her sister. Before she passed, she was *convinced* this was the reason. She asked me to share her story of God's grace to her and her *humanity* as often as I could. In the words of Mitch Albom from *Tuesday's with Morrie*, "My visits with [her] felt like a cleansing rinse of human kindness" (55), *and* I would add, a cleansing rinse of God's compassion.

We *all* will one day die. As a nurse friend of mine once said, "Science has shown that 10 out of 10 people die."<sup>3</sup> Are we sharing who we are with others? Are we sharing our sin, our humanity, God's grace with each other? Are we sharing the truth of what it means to be human, to be a sinner, saved by God's grace alone? Are we sharing the many things outside of our control about which we have become angry with God?

Young people – listen to me. Life *will* be hard. You *will* fail. You *will* wonder what the point is to this life and if you can really make a difference. Listen to my

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<sup>3</sup> From a conversation with Barbara Petersen.

words – this is *not* the end of the story. There is hope! Jesus came to a broken world *because* he loves *you*, not because you or anyone else deserved it, but because *no one* could ever be good enough. *Tell* the next generation, even those yet unborn, of the words and power of God, and *tell* them of our failures and of God’s compassion toward us. “For the LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love” (Ps 145:8). Amen.