

Humbled by Grace

Psalm 30

The Living Bible translation and The Message

1 I will [sing your praises], Lord, for you have rescued me.

You refused to allow my enemies to triumph over me.

2 O Lord my God, I cried to you for help,
and you restored my confidence and my health.

3 You brought me up from the grave, and
You kept me from falling into the pit of death and despair.

4 Sing to the Lord, all you godly ones!
Praise God's holy name.

5[God gets angry once in a while, but across
a lifetime there is only favor in God's love. The Message]

[After nights of crying your eyes out,
joy comes with the morning
And give way to days of laughter. Message]

6 When I was prosperous, I said,
"Nothing can stop me now!"

7 Your favor, O Lord, made me as secure as a mountain.
Then I thought you had turned away from me, and I was shattered.

8 I cried out to you, O Lord.
I begged you for mercy, saying,

9 "What will you gain if I die,
if I sink into the grave?

Can my dust praise you?
Can it tell of your faithfulness?

10[So listen! and be kind!
Help me out of this!" Message]

11 You have turned my mournful [lament] into joyful dancing.
You have [removed] my mourning clothes
and dressed me with [wildflowers of] joy,

12 that I might sing praises to you and not be silent.
O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever!

A few weeks ago, I was blessed to attend our annual conference. I have been

going yearly for about 6 or 7 years. This year, we were introduced to our new Bishop Minerva Carcano. She pledged to be present and transparent. She doesn't want us to be afraid to speak up and be heard. We need to acknowledge our limitations, renew our congregations, and at the same time, continue to create ministries that serve all without exception, especially the marginalized.

In the relatively short time I have been attending our annual conference, I have seen some significant changes. We are part of the Western jurisdiction, and therefore among some of the most progressive churches within the whole world of Methodism. But we too have our own cultural divides. When I first started going, there was still a pretty vocal contingent of folks who were struggling with the idea that God's inclusive love had room for full participation of LGBTQ laity and clergy, with arguments on the floor and in conversations throughout the conference. When I first began attending, I was told by others with longer history within the conference that those conversations had been very contentious and by then had already changed and mellowed compared to previous years. We as a larger culture and as a church have been going through a time of increasing openness and encouragement of the full diversity of all of God's people.

There is language in our UM Book of Discipline that says "homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teachings." Many of us would like this deeply hurtful and offending wording to be removed. It just doesn't align with the many statements within the BOD that affirm and celebrate God's inclusive love. In this conference session, there were several testimonies of this ongoing struggle for full inclusion of our LGBTQ siblings that we are engaged in as an international church. There is a small group within the larger church who are meeting regularly called "A way forward." This commission is comprised of folks from varied backgrounds, theologies, and nationalities. They are working on putting a human face on this discussion of full inclusion. Some within the church are concerned that the rift may be too large, and the church might be

pulled apart by this issue. When Brian Adkins shared some of his experiences as a member of this group, I was encouraged. Even initially with some very differing views, the members are building relationships, sharing and praying together. Through Holy Conferencing they are getting to know each other deeply in a process that is “life giving.” Brian has no idea what the outcome of this process will be for the larger church, but he is hopeful. And I was hopeful, too. Change is slow, but I feel more glimmers of confidence that attitudes are evolving.

We heard about United Methodist Women.... standing up, stepping up, being heard and helping others to be heard. There are 800K + members internationally. We saw and heard examples of many ministries within the UM Church that demonstrate on a daily basis what Cornell West has said, that “Justice is what love looks like in public.” There are many on the front lines of serving the many needs in our communities.

Erin Hawkins of the UM Commission on Religion and Race was the keynote speaker. The theme for the conference was “Testify to Love - Your story Matters” She spoke passionately, sharing things we have learned over the last several years, and the some of the challenges we still face. We are “still living into what it means to be *United*.” She challenged us to consider if we are talking about things that really matter? Do we have openness to other ideas: or is it all about us? When we turn on the news.... we hear testifying all over the place, but rarely testimonies of love. What are we doing to help to restore ourselves and others to wholeness? How are we helping to heal the brokenness that is all around us?

Our stories matter. We **must** share them so that we can truly know each other... So we can be bridges and strongly testify to God’s full inclusive, transforming love. This is not easy. It is necessary part of our calling. Even as she applauded and appreciated our social justice stance on many issues, she was forceful in her testimony of our lack of commitment as a nation and a church. She cautioned

Don't use the poor as a means to an end. Be authentic in your genuine connection with those on the margins. When Jesus said, "The poor will always be with you." he was saying we as the church don't possess the true moral commitment to end poverty - financial, educational, emotional and spiritual. When we don't actively hold others accountable to our shared responsibility, we insure that the poor will always be among us. Who should we be blessing? Many are getting this, but not enough. We need more who are stepping up into this new narrative. Are we ready to truly be the church? Is there a story you need to let go of and lay down so you can move forward? We may not have all the answers, but we serve the Christ who does.

Erin was an inspiration!!

The Psalms are full of prayers and praise. In times of sorrow and regret, we lament and mourn our losses and transgressions. When uplifted, we express our deep gratitude. From Psalm 30

you have rescued me.

you restored my confidence and my health.

You have turned my mournful [lament] into joyful dancing.

You have ... dressed me with [wild flowers of] joy,

that I might sing praises to you and not be silent.

...I will give you thanks forever!

We are called to not be silent and give thanks forever.... unceasingly. If we truly feel rescued and restored and moved to deep gratitude, our lives then become a prayer. We respond to all of life with the knowledge of God's grace working within our lives. We are humbly reminded that we are one among many in God's inclusive family.

Several of us are continuing to gather together in a small group the explore the

Mystery, the holy presence of God in the midst of our ordinary lives. Meredith Jordan, author of Embracing the Mystery writes

There comes a point when we must say *yes* or *no* to the active presence of Mystery in our lives.... when we must figure out if we truly desire to grow closer in relation to the sacred or the make a graceful retreat.... Perhaps God experiences everything of the human experiment through our experiences. Perhaps God is transformed along with us whenever one of us allows the veil to part, and remembers. Perhaps life is a co-creative encounter between God and human... where we are both made new. To believe this.... we must live as if the God in each of us - the Mystery in all of life - matters. Every lesson, every small or significant event, and every person we encounter on the path is the Mystery in the process of becoming. God isn't finished with the light-years long work of exploring the potential for developing.... just as our efforts to become fully, wholly, authentically en-spirited human beings takes most of a lifetime, if not more.

In another essay, she shares images of dancers and musicians, and potters... who with the synchronized movements in their bodies are able to create beauty... to walk in beauty. These artists are able to fully embody the wonder they see and feel.

Each of them fully embodied a truth woven deep into the fabric of their being. Each of them, so clearly [taps into] a portal for Beauty to pour into the world... an opening for Creation to come fully alive in our midst... each of the dancers was born to dance, each musician born to make music. Even a potter [or other artisan] was born to make beauty that is enjoyed in homes and museums and palaces.

One doesn't have to dance, to call music out of hard-carved instruments, or to throw pots to become an expression of the

Mystery. One only has to be what is written in the covenant we carry in our hearts. For some of us, it takes a lifetime to find what that might be, but when we find it, we are challenged to become the living embodiment of this gift.

Each person, however humble our beginnings or how irrelevant our gifts may seem to be, has been perfectly, elegantly designed for a purpose. When we live in full intention, we serve as a shining expression of a living Mystery.

Humility is about being all God wants us to be.... no better or worse than anyone else. Challenges arise all the time. This is life. We sometimes respond too quickly without considering the consequences. Or arrogance or anger rises within us, suggesting that we believe we know what's best for others. Or we might slink away and ignore the situation all together. But much better yet, when we consider what would truly be helpful in any given situation, we are often reminded that humility is the best response. With humility, it feels like God is lighting our path, showing us the way.

As individuals, as the church, and as communities, we are called to show up, to step up, to respond.

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May our hearts be filled and moved to respond to God's grace. May our lives humbly reflect God's call to be of service to all, without exception.