Proper 15A: Matthew 23:13-15, 23-36
Church of the Good Shepherd
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August 20, 2023

I hate them with perfect hatred:
The Cursing Psalms

"Surely you don't mean for us to pray *those* psalms!" That's the response many people have when I suggest they read the psalms and they discover that the Psalter contains some pretty fiery prayers. These prayers known as the "cursing psalms," show up with shocking frequency in the Psalter (more than 30 by one count). In fact, there is hardly a page of the Psalms that isn't left smoking by a pungent curse.

> Break the break the arm of the wicked and the evildoer (10:16)
> Upon the wicked he shall rain coals of fire and burning sulfur (11:7)
> You will put them to flight and aim your arrows at their faces (21:13)
> O God, break their teeth in their mouths…Let them be like the snail that melts away, like a stillborn child that never sees the sun (58:6,8)
> Drive them with your tempest and terrify them with your storm! (83:15)
> O that you would slay the wicked, O God. ... I hate them with perfect hatred. (139:18, 22)

And in probably the most shocking psalm of all:

> O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction! Happy shall be the one who pays you back for what you have done to us! Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks! (Psalm 137:8-9)

You can't help but think the psalmists are some right angry people! More than that, we may wonder what to do with their angry prayers, whether Christians can in fact pray them faithfully. The answer is, in a word, "Yes!" Christians *should* pray the psalms, even the ones that call down God's wrath upon our enemies. Or better, we should know that these psalms are available and even appropriate for Christians to pray, and sometimes they are necessary. But they are a tool. And like most tools, they must be used responsibly, or else they become dangerous to ourselves and others.

The psalm Cortes just read, Psalm 109, is a perfect example. The psalm starts out like a lament, with complaints about enemies.

> Hold not your tongue, O God of my praise;
> for the mouth of the wicked, the mouth of the deceitful, is opened against me.
> They speak to me with a lying tongue;
> they encompass me with hateful words and fight against me without a cause. (v1-2)

There is a special poignancy to this plea, for as with other cursing psalms, the psalmists' enemies are not faceless. They are people well-known to the psalmist, even dear friends. And so the psalmist had every reason to expect love from them (v3-4). But instead…

They repay evil for good, and hatred for my love.
Despite my love, they accuse me;
but as for me, [the psalmist asserts], I pray for them.

And consider how he "prays" for his erstwhile friend (v5-10).

Let his days be few, and let another take his office.
Let his children be fatherless, and his wife become a widow.
Let his children be homeless beggars; let them be driven from the ruins of their homes.
Let the creditor seize everything he has; let the IRS plunder his bank account.

I'll bet you've never heard these words at church! This is *raw* hate—a can of black spray paint defacing a white marble memorial, spilled wine on a wedding dress. Who let *this* in our prayer book? And hadn't we better get it out? A lot of people think so.

And yet the crazy thing is, Israel did not. Israel did not purge these vengeful words from the Bible but instead regarded them as legitimate prayer. Which means that, by clapping our hands over the psalmist's mouth, refusing to listen to that anger, let alone have it on their lips, we are in danger of losing something the Bible intends us to have—the opportunity to bring our own anger into our relationship with God.

Indeed, those who want to remove these psalms from worship fail to understand that our hate needs to be prayed, not suppressed. It's not simply that when we suppress our anger, it'll fest or else explode. That's true, but more than that, it's that God wants our prayers, our honest prayers, not prettified, polite prayers. Such fake prayers do us no good. As my seminary professor counseled us: "Don't pray where you think you should be. Pray where you are. Otherwise, the angels won't know where to find you when they come to meet you." We need to pray who we actually are, not who we think we should be.

Indeed, the way of prayer is not to cover our unlovely emotions so that they will appear respectable, but to expose them…so that they can be enlisted in the work of the Kingdom. You see, hate has another, larger purpose, beyond expressing our objection to being abused. Hate is our emotional link with what we might call a 'spirituality of evil.' Hate is what we feel when we or someone else has been violated, the proper response when we see someone destroy part of God's good order, when someone brutalizes women and men who are made in the image of God. We see such injustice and we hate it. Were we to deny that hate, we would deprive ourselves an essential insight and a good deal of energy in doing battle with evil. For, hate is what gives us the energy to fight injustice, to speak the truth amidst socially pressured lies. To be sure, hate is not pretty; it's the ugliest and most dangerous of our emotions, the hair trigger on a loaded gun. But without it, we retreat, become complacent with injustice, and let evil have its reign. Hate gives us the "kick" we need to get up and do something about the wrong we see.

In this way, the cursing psalms help us neither to dismiss our anger as something improper or, on the other end, to let it get the better of us, but instead to *hold our anger in good faith*. There used to be an expression common in the South, you may have heard of it—"losing my religion." This has nothing to do with unbelief, but was instead about losing one's temper. To fly off the handle at something or someone was to "lose your religion." Well, the cursing psalms help us to "hold onto our religion" by giving God our anger, and not letting our enemies "have it." Because sometimes we do feel this way, sometimes we feel like bashing in the heads of our enemies, or at least bad-mouthing them behind their backs. But the cursing

psalms show us we can take that anger and offer it, along with our more attractive thoughts, for God to transform, for God to use our spiritual growth.

Here's how that works, five ways.

1) First, *the cursing psalms give us words for our anger* when we are too stunned by its enormity to find our own words, when we are so spittin' mad we can't even talk. Someone once counseled me, whenever I am hurt and angered, to go to a chapel or my room or somewhere else where I could be alone and shout these psalms at the top of my lungs. I can't say I've ever done that, but these psalms do invite this use. They provide a vent for our anger. And in so doing, they give us a means to move beyond our blind rage towards the articulation of our feelings, which is necessary before we can start reflecting on them, on what sparked them and what to do with them. Without words, though, we are stuck in our anger.

2) Second, because these psalms are given to us *to pray*, they show us that *vengeful anger is a legitimate mode of access to God*. The cry for vengeance is not *simply* a venting of anger or mere self-expression, but prayer, based on what we know to be true: God cares about justice, as much as he does grace. Like a parent of quarreling children, God is angered when we hurt each other. The cursing psalms, by affirming our anger, affirm that we are right and justified in naming and denouncing evil, including evil directed against ourselves. This is not, however, to confuse righteousness with *self*-righteousness. Indeed, the way to distinguish between the two is to consider *whose* judgment is being invoked, *who* is expected execute judgment—us or God.

3) This brings us to the third and most important lesson these psalms offer—that *the cry for vengeance invariably takes the form of an appeal for* God *to act.* Psalm 109 cries, "Help me, O LORD my God; save me for your mercy's sake. Let them know that this is *your* hand, that *you*, O LORD, have done it."

The psalms do not authorize us to undertake a vendetta, to pour sugar in their gas tank, to pick up a gun or hire one. On the contrary, the validity of any punishment that may occur in response to our prayer depends entirely on it being *God's* action. Judgment is God's prerogative, not ours. And readers of the Bible recognize that this is in fact a severely limiting condition. For God's action is free, directed not only to *our* well-being, to *our* healing, but to the healing of the whole moral order. Through these psalms, we demand that our enemies be driven into God's hands. But who can say what will happen to them there? For God is manifest in judgment of our enemies, but also in mercy towards them. Thus vengeful psalms are not at odds with the command to pray for our enemies. We can pray for justice for ourselves, even as we trust that God will do what is best for those who harm us.

4) Even now, you may still believe you can't pray these psalms faithfully, that since Jesus prayed for his enemies on the cross, we should too. How then can these psalms be understood as God's word for us? One way that we might interpret these psalms (and if this helps, use it) is to *consider the enemies referred to in the psalms to be the enemies of the cause of God*—not our own personal enemies, but enemies of God who do us wrong for the sake of God, who persecute God's people. Thinking this way, we are precluded all thought of personal revenge, for it's not us but God who's been offended. We can then leave the execution of justice to God, as Paul instructs. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." In this way, the prayer of vengeance is actually a kind of implicit faith, for in praying to God we are entrusting the matter to God, giving it to Him to judge sin, and not claiming the authority ourselves.

5) One final angle. All that has been said here applies to praying the cursing psalms when *we* are angry. But what are we to do with them when we are not? Suppose you run across one of these psalms as you are praying through the Psalter, but at that moment you are blessedly free of such dark feelings. Is there any opportunity for prayer then? Well, the ancient rabbis had this interesting saying concerning Scripture: "Turn it and turn it, for everything is in it." What they meant is, if you have the courage (and it will take some courage), *try turning the psalm a full 180 degrees, until it is directed at yourself.* Then ask: Is there anyone in the community of God's people, or outside it, who might want to say this to God *about me*? Is there anyone who is that angry at me? In this way, these hate-filled psalms can, believe it or not, lead us to have more compassion towards others.

To be sure, hate and anger can be ugly—and scary. But it can also be useful. For just as hurt brings us to our knees praying for help, so anger is what brings us to our feet praying for justice. Anger is in the end a sign that we care. It is often the only emotion with enough force to penetrate our protective smugness and apathy. That does not mean that prayer justifies hate. Rather, prayer uses it. Neither is hurt good; yet hurt wakes us to our need for help. When prayed, anger, hate and hurt often provide our first steps into the presence of God. And, once there, God can use those feelings to put the enemies of life and salvation on notice, and then to involve us in active compassion for their victims. Once involved, though, we recognize that, while hate can be the spark for ignition, it is the wrong fuel for the engines of judgment; only love is adequate to sustain these passions.

But that journey from anger to love is only possible if we let ourselves feel anger in the first place. The cursing psalms give us that permission. They are tools that God uses, that God has given us to involve us in God's plan of establishing a kingdom of justice on earth as it is in heaven. And in so doing God is able to turn our curses into blessings. Thanks be to God.