

## “Humanely Human”

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November 15, 2020

Pentecost 24



### Readings

I look to you, heaven-dwelling God,  
look up to you for help.  
Like servants, alert to their master’s commands,  
like a maiden attending her lady,  
We’re watching and waiting, holding our breath,  
awaiting your word of mercy.  
Mercy, God, mercy!  
We’ve been kicked around long enough,  
Kicked in the teeth by complacent rich men,  
kicked when we’re down by arrogant brutes.

Psalm 123

A Song of Pilgrims from *the Message* by Eugene Peterson

I am deeply invested in the work of building disparate community, in navigating differences, in seeing the inherent commonalities of our shared humanity. I have made that my life’s work for three decades as a pastor and activist—but there are limits to what this means....

Racists and bigots see other human beings as less than human for an unchangeable part of who they are, and I will not descend into that. I can fully see their humanity and still call them out for thinking and speaking and acting inhumanely—and I can show them decency and simultaneously declare myself distinct from the malevolence they affirm and want to live with distance from them. People of faith, morality, and conscience are not required to make peace with hatred.

John Pavlovitz in a post entitled *No, You Don’t Owe Hateful People Unity*  
from his blog *Stuff That Needs to Be Said*

If you ever need to curl your hair, sometimes a Hebrew psalm will do it for you. The book of Psalms, more than anything else, is an ancient song book. Obviously, we have no idea what the songs sounded like. There are no musical lines, no available harmonies and no recordings. What we have are Hebrew words in poetic form, running the gamut of human emotion, from pastoral scenes of security and comfort, to anger and rage leveled at the enemy, or sometimes even directed at God. They express moments of joy and gratitude for the Creator and creation. Other times there are demands for God to end the silence, to rescue the divine reputation and simply DO SOMETHING.

We can get into a lot of trouble with the Psalms when we try to develop a theological system around them. They don't really contain prescriptions for how to act, how to pray, or even how to relate to God. They seem instead to describe sensate responses to the deep wounds experienced by the Hebrew people, as well as their desire to interpret those wounds within the context of the one true God they thought they knew. Some of the images are beautiful. Some are ugly, even violent. You can begin just about anywhere and start reading. Within an hour or so, you'll have discovered this range of feeling within yourself. You'll be inspired to draw close to a loving divinity, and in the next breath you'll be horrified at the way this deity behaves. I find great value in the Psalms, though, because like any work of art, they evoke within me this same range of light and shadow, love and fear, gratitude and anxiety.

Eugene Peterson's take on the 123<sup>rd</sup> Psalm which is labeled in Hebrew text a "song of pilgrims," shouts the words, "Mercy, God. MERCY! We've been kicked around long enough." Have you ever felt that way? Let's be honest. As always with Peterson's work, *The Message*, we're seeing not a translation of the Hebrew text, but his paraphrase couched in the kind of language he used when explaining the scriptures to his children. And I think it's fine if we all want to become Eugene Peterson's children once in a while, especially when we come up against something difficult, something from which we'd otherwise recoil and then perhaps ignore.

This presentation of the psalm could be entitled, *Help Me, I'm Being Bullied!* I dare say that everyone has been bullied at one time or another. Even bullies have been bullied. How else would they have learned to do it so well? Jesus was bullied of course—by the Romans, by a corrupt priesthood, even by his hometown folks who thought he was insane. Early Christian writings emphasize his teachings about peacemaking, about love for enemies, and turning the other cheek, leaving some of us to feel like the only right response to bullying is to love and pray for the perpetrator, but it's more complex than that.

Over the years, whenever I have preached on the subject, the question has arisen, "How far must I go with this? Is there no limit? Am I just supposed to take it and offer humility and peace in return?" Someone who might answer that question in the negative is one of our contemporary prophets by the name of John Pavlovitz. You may notice that I quote him pretty often. His blog, *Stuff That Needs to Be Said*, always gives us a shot of adrenalin just like one of those high intensity psalms we spoke of earlier.

There is a time for everything, a time to seek a middle ground, but also a time to point out what is obvious. White supremacy, for example, is not a morally benign choice in a list of possible human behaviors. Putting your knee on someone's neck for eight minutes as he begs for his life is not a viable expression of the rule of law. Inventing lies and conspiracies is not something approved of in any of our founding documents as a moral basis for national leadership. In this time, as we yearn for national unity, when we seek healing for our sacred institutions as well as our planet, and as we work for social, racial, and economic justice, John Pavlovitz reminds us that "people of faith, morality, and conscience are not required to make peace with hatred." We have a choice about whether we will hate in return, but we do not need to make peace with others' choice to hate. We can be humanely human. Humane, in that we show basic decency to those who speak and act inhumanely, and human in that we declare ourselves distinct from the bigotry they affirm.

A couple of days before the election we made a trek north toward Healdsburg on route 101. Between Novato and Petaluma we encountered a caravan loudly supporting a candidate who did not happen to have our vote. This caravan originated in Santa Rosa, and had gone south to Marin City where they formed an intimidating presence in the only predominantly black community that exists in our county. When we passed them, they were heading back to their place of origin. It felt a bit dangerous because they went slowly, at times preventing people from accessing on and off ramps. I am a firm believer in everyone's First Amendment rights, but it's not a stretch to say we felt a little bullied by the presence of this caravan. We made no eye contact, made no political statement with ourselves or our vehicle; we just focused on the road in front of us and kept on going. Since that time, as we all know, it's been something of a roller coaster, but I'd be lying if I said I'm not at all anxious about the clashes that have gone on in the streets of Washington this weekend. We all know that a potential exists for civil unrest, even in the most peaceful transfers of power. But what is happening now leaves me a bit chilled, unable to exhale the way I want to, a bit more watchful of my surroundings.

In our part of the world, we all know what happens when lightening strikes in the midst of a drought. A bit of carelessness on the part of any human can have the same effect. Once a fire starts it is difficult and costly to extinguish, and a lot of people get hurt and suffer loss in the process. As people of faith and spiritual progressiveness, we do not want to provoke anything that sparks a conflagration, so we behave wisely, clearly, humanely but FIRMLY. We speak the truth every time we're given an opportunity. We do not share incendiary material from sources we cannot verify as honest and trustworthy. We speak the truth in love, the kind of love that takes no delight in falsehood, the kind of love that wins the day, that lifts up the downtrodden and gives hope to all who are lost and confused.

Let us pray for peace, for de-escalation and understanding, while insisting that the pillars of our democracy be preserved. We have so much work to do. There is hunger, homelessness and disease all around us, and it all needs to be healed. Give us the freedom to do this healing work. Let us be humanely human.

