

## *Humble Joy*

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Psalm 131

“O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high...”

Memorial Day

### *Movement 1 – How are you Doing?*

How are you doing? The salutatory question has become a staple in our contemporary informal parlance. It has become more a statement and less a question in our modern discourse. It is a question that no one expects to have answered. Especially in this part of the United States, especially on the East Coast we throw the question around without expecting an answer, and if we do receive an answer it is surface and safe. We expect a non-threatening response that is no more than one syllable.

Yet there are times when someone expects more. There are times when the question is more than a salutation; it is an actual question. Do you remember the beer commercial from a couple of years ago? The commercial starts out in what is clearly an East Coast bar, probably in New Jersey, and each practitioner greets each others with the typical and standard, “how ya doin’.” The salutations bounce around the room with grace with ease and with a *savoir faire* that all mobster movies attempt to emulate. “How ya doin’, how ya doin’, how ya doin’.” Then in walks a tall, blond hair, blue eyed man who, if we didn’t know better, we would have thought it was John Voight from *Midnight Cowboy* on the wrong set at the wrong time. He saunters up to the bar and takes a seat, beaming of innocence and naiveté. The bartender walks up to him and greets him with the local salutation, “how ya doin’,” and this stranger in a strange land answers, “Well I’m doing fine....” This occurs again and again as a new person enters the bar, clearly showing that the stranger does not understand the nature of the question/statement.

Cultural differences aside, there are times when we are expected to give an honest and in-depth answer, and that can be scary. It can be scary because such a question drives at the status of our lives. Such a question pushes and pulls at some of our inner-most corners and closets of our soul. It is not really a question asking how you are doing, but really asking, what are you hopeful about? Where do you place your trust for your future? How are you doing?

If you are at a professional gathering, the person is really asking, how is your business, how is your career, how much are you getting paid, what is working well, what are you hopeful about with your business, how are you doing? When I meet other pastors at various gatherings and they ask, “how are you doing,” they really want to know how the church is doing, how many people attend worship on Sunday, and if I am successful with my ministry (whatever “successful” means – we’ll get to that later). They want to know what is hopeful on the horizon. How are you doing? When you go to a school reunion this question is dangerous. An old high school flame, an old high school friend asks how you are doing, wondering if they are better off than you are, wondering if you made good decisions or bad decisions. They want to know if they can brag. How are you doing?

John Cusack’s character, Martin Blank in the movie *Gross Point Blank*, is a man who flipped out at his high school prom, ran off to join the army and then became a

professional hit man. In a weird turn of events he ended up in his home town for a “job” that happened to be at the same time as his ten year high school reunion. After waffling and wavering, he finally decided to attend his reunion, yet he could not figure out how to answer the question “how are you doing.” He didn’t know how to tell people what he did for a living. He was afraid of the question.

Whenever we read the Psalms we end up asking ourselves that same question with our faith. We read in the Psalm today of someone who is approaching the Lord with humility and grace and trust, and maybe we find that we begin to compare ourselves to the psalmist. Maybe we read of this supposed devotion and ask, how are we doing with our faith? What do we place our trust upon? How is our relationship with God? How are we doing?

It is a dangerous question, a question that opens up a window to your life and your soul. It is a question that threatens your privacy in the wrong context, it is a question that ultimately is asking where you are placing your hope. Where is your hope, where is your assurance that you will be ok tomorrow? Where is your belief that you are going to be successful, that you are going to be happy? How are you doing? Where do you place your hope?

### *Movement 2 – Shouting the Answer*

Faced with such a question, faced with such a threatening, challenging question we are pushed to offer an answer. We need to say something and we need to think fast so we can say something that we can be proud of. “Fine” won’t work, so we need to offer more. Maybe we have a child who has been struggling with drugs, who has gone from school to school because he was constantly kicked out for one thing or another. Maybe he hasn’t been able to hold down a job for the past six months, and currently he is living in your basement. This child is pushing you to the end of your wits, and when your friend asks you how you are doing and how your son is doing, you want to have something to be proud of, something to boast about. Your mind races as you try to think where you place your hope for this child, and then you puff up your chest, you offer a smile, big and broad and say, things are good because today, Jonny is not in prison.

We try to find something to emphasize, something we can boast about that we can share and then we shout. Such a statement about one’s child is a whisper of light in the great noise and darkness of hopelessness, and yet the parent shouts it out as if Jonny has just won the Nobel Prize for physics. He’s not in prison, that’s a success.

We may be selling a home that is run down, that has a termite problem, and is in a terrible neighborhood, and we emphasize the positive, advertising it as a quant and unique home with character and possibilities. We may be working in a job that is literally sucking our lives dry, that is offering nothing by way of hope, that is doing nothing to make you look forward to tomorrow, but when someone asks how the job is going, you smile, say great, and talk about all the zeros on your paycheck. We shout and we puff up our lives in our answers.

When some were bragging that they were better Jews, maybe even “super Jews” Paul puffed up his chest and said, “... circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” (from Philippians 3:5-6 – remember that afterwards, in verse 7, Paul states,

“Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.”). Paul was boasting, shouting who he was to show what kinds of successes he could stand upon.

It is like we are weaving a security blanket with our boasting and our bragging; we are creating something that we can hold onto, that we can grasp and place our hope in. It is our security blanket, because the amount of money we make, the degrees we have, the home we live in, the spouse we have are all things that we are going to trust in, to rest upon for the future. Nietzsche argues that we can either be a part of a herd and controlled by a few and buying into a fleeting hope and fancy, or we make ourselves into an *bermensch*, a super person who can boast and brag and control the masses and the spoils of this world. We all are working to make ourselves into that *bermensch*, that person who boasts and brags and has something to stand upon.

Imagine the psalmist standing in the temple, like the humble sinner in the synagogue listening to the Pharisee praying. He looks over and finds a man in fine robes; very sure of himself and bragging, shouting all that he has done and all that he has to be proud of. You can tell where he places his hope, in his coffers, in his home, and in the security he has achieved.

As a church we sometime shout the answers of our hope pointing to those things we feel we should be proud of. We point to our attendance, we point to our programs, and we point to our building, our choir, our organ or many other aspects of the church that can be quantified. This is where we place our hope and claim as success. We do not look at the faith of the members. We do not look at the action of the Holy Spirit, but at those things which can be held, measured and quantified.

As Christians, we are doing well in our faith if we go to church every day. We are doing well in our faith if we can quote scripture. We can brag in our faith if we give a lot of money. We can brag in our faith if we are on a committee, or even better chairing a committee. We brag in our faith because of the great works that we do. In our actions is where we place our hope.

Where do you place your hope? Where do you look to say, things will be ok in the end? What do you rest upon to brag? Where do you place your hope?

### *Movement 3 – Clinging to our Loosely Woven Blanket*

In time the security blanket we have clung to so tightly will unravel. Our voices grow hoarse, and like Linus, our blankets wears out and we lose that security we stand upon. When we lose our job, what can we brag about? When our health fails, what can we brag about? When the house is gone, the car is gone, what can we brag about?

Flannery O’Connor writes about a 104 year old Civil War vet living in his past, and boasting about only his past in the story, “A Late Encounter with the Enemy.” The General is self-centered, is focused only on his former life, and is now a withered and dying man. He brags about who he was, for that is all he places his hope in, and who he was is now gone and dead. His hope was gone, and yet he still grasped for it.

The things we hold onto, the things we grasp can only carry us for so long, can only maintain us for a certain amount of time and eventually we lose what we have. Or there comes that moment when we realize that all we have accumulated amounts to nothing. We can forget the verses we worked so hard to memorize. We can lose the

ability to serve and to lead. We may even lose the ability to go to church every week. Those things upon which we place our trust and our hope are all fleeting.

There comes a time when we realize with the existentialists, with Sartre or Camus that all we have amounts to nothing and we start to really wonder, where can we place our hope; how are we really doing? There comes a time when we realize that no matter how hard we work, how much effort, how much energy we use, we will never have enough and we can never truly say that we are ok. There comes that point when we reach the Tillichian moment of despair and realize that we are finite and yet we yearn and we strive for the infinite in our hopes and dreams. There comes a time when we realize that as a church we will never have enough people, we will never have a good enough building, and we can always do better. We realize that a church of a thousand is no better or worse off than a church of one hundred. The security blanket we hold to so tightly begins to unravel.

Or there are times when trauma and tragedy strikes and the question reaches deeper into our lives. I remember visiting family in grief because they had just lost a child. I remember going to their home sitting down on the couch across from the father and the mother. Their eyes were red, their faces were heavy and tired and the silence hung like cobwebs in a room where time slowed to almost a stop. I remember sitting in silence for an eternity while both parents drew their breath slowly and deliberately and finally I looked at them and asked that profound and powerful question, "How are you?" They knew this was not a salutation, nor was it a simple question looking for a surface answer. I was looking into the window of their lives and I was asking to be let in. How are you? They were well off. They lived in a comfortable home. Both parents were successful by any stretch of the imagination. They had two other children who were loving and attentive. Some could look at them and say they are doing well. They could hide behind their own shouting and boasting and say, "fine," pointing at all that they have gained, but that day they did not. That day instead they answered with tears, with cries of hurt and with a longing to hear from God for they did not know how they were. They had lost much, they were deep with grief and no longer could they boast; no longer could they say they were doing fine. Instead they looked to God and hoped to hear that they would be ok. When life's reality sets in, when the bragging reaches its point of absurdity, where will you look to place your hope? How will you know that you are ok?

#### *Movement 4 – Taking our Trust, In God we Trust*

Look to God for the answer. Look to God for hope and for trust and for life. When you lose everything, how do you know that you are still someone of worth? When you have nothing what makes you someone? Look to God. Look to God for that assurance, for that hope and for that trust.

This is different from the kind of assurance we garner through our boasting. When we boast, when we shout we are making ourselves somebody through our merits and achievements. Maybe the psalmist saw this, maybe the psalmist walked through the market place and saw people claiming their place and their importance by what they had acquired and achieved and knew that this was not the way to live. Maybe the psalmist saw this and decided instead of taking on his mantle of bragging, to go to the Lord with humility, with a heart that is not lifted up, with eyes not raised to high and without focusing on things to great and marvelous. Like David facing Goliath. Remember that

David was given armor, but he refused. David was given great weapons, but he refused. Instead David went humbly before the Lord, placed his trust in the Lord and then went before Goliath without fanfare or triumph. David was not trusting in material things, in flashy things, but trusted the Lord.

Imagine Mary when the angel appeared to her and told her that she was going to bear a child who would be king. She could have demanded medical insurance, better care, a better place to live. She could have demanded something that would give her the assurance that things, that she would be ok, but instead she said, "Let it be." She placed her hope and her trust in the Lord.

A child that is not weaned cries at the first pang of hunger. A child who is not weaned is constantly clinging to his or her mother for fear that she may leave him when hunger strikes. Yet a child that is weaned trusts that he or she will be cared for when needs arise. A child that is weaned does not worry about getting the next meal, but trusts his or her parent. This is the trust that we are called to have, to trust that when the time comes, God will be with us. We do not have to cling to our belongings, our titles, our material things, but can trust the Lord. We do not need to be assured or convinced that everything will be ok all of the time; instead we are to trust the Lord.

Think of Christ. He did not look for a throne here on earth. He did not look for fancy robes or riches to validate his fame and his place in the world. Instead Christ did his ministry and trusted the Lord. He reached out to the untouchables and trusted the Lord. He reached out to the sick and hurting and trusted the Lord. He preached of the Kingdom of God, a kingdom where boasting is not necessary and trusted the Lord. He stood up to the powers and principalities and trusted the Lord. He went all the way to the cross and trusted the Lord. Christ lived his life trusting the Lord.

In Salinger's book *Franny and Zooey*, Franny at one point exclaims, "Just because I'm so horribly conditioned to accept everybody else's values, and just because I like applause and people to rave about me, doesn't make it right. I'm ashamed of it. I'm sick of it. I'm sick of not having the courage to be an absolute nobody. I'm sick of myself and everybody else that wants to make some kind of a splash."

This is what we are called to have, the courage to be an absolute nobody. The courage to say no to the promotion, to say no to the bigger house, to say no to the flash and the bling and to place our hope in the Lord. We will be well, we will be ok, when we place our trust in the Lord.

#### *Movement 5 – Humble Devotion*

Yet we are to act and live as Christians. We are still to do ministry, but not for the sake of boasting, but out of a devotion to the Lord. We are to act, but not so that we are to be noticed. We are to live humbly, quietly and follow the Lord.

It is as if we are given two paths to follow in our faith. One could be the path of General Patton, grandiose and full of bravado. Patton is one who looks to make the great moves and brag about what he has done. Or to follow the path of General Bradley who is depicted in the famous movie as someone who is quiet and humble and just does what needs to be done. Are we to be the kind of Christian and kind of church that does things to be noticed, or do we do things because the Lord is calling us to do them.

I have a friend who is currently participating in AA. He was telling me once that he was encouraged in his meeting to do nice things to others, but to not be noticed. If he

was noticed then it wouldn't count and he would have to do something else. It is like we all become Secret Santas of good works for others in the world.

We aren't looking for God to look at us and say, "Well done my good and faithful servant." We aren't looking for God to say, because you did so much this week, because you gave so much this week you will be blessed by me. No, we trust that we are blessed, that we are not saved by works but by grace and we act out of love. Martin Luther, a man who struggled with the notion of works and grace believed that there was nothing we could do to earn our salvation. He believed that we have nothing to boast about and that we should approach the Lord with humility. Yet he also believed that out of a humble devotion we are called to do good works for others. We are called to lift up those who have been pushed down. We are called to help those who are surrounded by violence. We are called to share our gifts with others. Yet it is a humble devotion through which we act. It is a humble devotion that does not place hope in what we do, but in who God is. It is a humble devotion that places a hope in the Lord, as the psalm calls us to do. Hope in the Lord that you are ok. Hope in the Lord that you are blessed. Hope in the Lord that you are glorious. Hope in the Lord and know that you are redeemed.

#### *Movement 6 – Humble Joy*

This gives us joy, humble joy. We have a joy, not in what we do, not in what we have but in who we are. We have a humble joy as we approach the Lord with our eyes lowered, with our hands on the simple and realistic life waiting to be led by the Lord. We find a humble joy because we are loved by God.

When writing on the psalm, Augustine commented that our sacrifice towards the body of Christ is our humility. We are not to reach to high, or to grasp for things that are beyond us, but humbly submit and follow the leading of the Lord. And we will find joy. We will find joy knowing that we will be well because we are embraced by the Lord.

We will find joy because we have been named and claimed by the Lord.

We will find joy because we have been blessed and redeemed by the Lord.

We will find joy because we have been lifted up by the Lord.

Not because of what we have. Not because of where we live. Not because of what we have done, but because we are children of God.

Cease your boasting and start your laughing. Cease your bragging and start living. Live life with a humble joy knowing that with God it will be well.

AMEN