

Teach, Lead, Guide
United Church of Broomfield
February 21, 2021

Psalms 25:1-10 (The Voice)

- ¹ **ALWAYS** I will lift up my soul to You, Eternal One,
² **BECAUSE** You are my God and I put my trust in You.
Do not let me be humiliated.
Do not let my enemies celebrate at my expense.
- ³ **CERTAINLY** none of the people who rely on You will be shamed,
but those who are unfaithful, who intentionally deceive,
they are the ones who will be disgraced.
- ⁴ **DEMONSTRATE** Your ways, O Eternal One.
Teach me *to understand* so I can follow.
- ⁵ **EASE** me down *the path of* Your truth.
FEED me Your word
because You are the True God who has saved me.
I wait all day long, *hoping, trusting* in You.
- ⁶ **GRACIOUS** Eternal One, remember Your compassion; *rekindle* Your concern and love,
which have always been *part of Your actions toward those who are Yours*.
- ⁷ do not **HOLD** against me the sins I committed when I was young;
instead, deal with me according to Your mercy and love.
Then Your goodness may be *demonstrated in all the world*, Eternal One.
- ⁸ **IMMENSELY** good and honorable is the Eternal;
that's why He teaches sinners the way.
- ⁹ with **JUSTICE**, He directs the humble *in all that is right*,
and He shows them His way.
- ¹⁰ **KIND** and true are all the ways of the Eternal
to the people who keep His covenant and His words.

We all know the story of Jonah and the Whale, right?

- Jonah's a prophet preaching to the people of Israel
- God tells Jonah, "Go preach to the people of Ninevah, their wicked and need guidance.
- Jonah hates this idea because Ninevah is the enemy of Israel. "I'm not helping them!"
- Jonah runs the opposite way to Joppa – jumps on a ship.
- God sends a storm --- tosses the ship around.
- The men on the ship think the storm is Jonah's fault. They ask him, "what do we do with you? He said, "toss me overboard." So they did. Storm stops.
- A big fish/whale then swallows up Jonah. Jonah won't drown. He prays to God – "save me, I was wrong."
- The whale throws up Jonah ... where? Ninevah.
- SO.....Jonah preaches to the people of Ninevah.
- They hear God's message and repent.
- Jonah goes home.

What did Jonah learn?

- You can't OUTFIGHT God – opposite direction? On water verses on land? Doesn't matter.
- You can't OUTWIT God – being tossed in the rough seas Jonah thought he would drown and die – ha! That'll show God!
- You can't OUTLAST God – was three days inside a fish and being spewed onto the beach of Ninevah worth it?

Why is it that most of us learn some things the proverbial hard way -- at great personal cost? Some of us have spent more time than we would care to repeat in the school of hard knocks, and some of us have watched helplessly as some of our friends and children have trotted off all too eagerly to that same school, despite our protestations that they will regret it.

The hard way, of course, is not the only way to learn things, and, in our better moments, at least, we would hope to absorb most of the things we need to know in life in easier and less costly fashion.

And that brings us to the prayer that is found in Psalm 25. "Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths."

The psalmist was probably not asking for knowledge. When he says, "Teach me your paths," I doubt he was thinking, "I need to know what the Ten Commandments are." It's likely he could already recite those. He could probably even tell you some of the ways that the great scribes and teachers of Israel had interpreted those commandments and the various situations they had described in which each of the big ten should be applied.

What's more, he probably wasn't asking to know what God's will was regarding a specific situation in his own life. There may have been other times when he did pray to know God's will, but that is not what was going on here. What the psalmist was praying for here was that he be made "teachable," that he be enabled to so internalize what he already knew about God's ways that they would become the guiding force in the critical situations of his life. In other words, he was asking that he learn on a gut level the things God wanted him to know, and that he learn them without having to attend the school of hard knocks, without having to go through the depths of a personal hell to get there.

When it is understood that way, it seems that "Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths" is a prayer every Christian ought to pray frequently. Most of us know quite a bit about the Bible and about God's will for us in general, and we have no shortage of clarity about the difference in right and wrong. But there is a real difference between head knowledge and the commitment of our will to live by what we know.

Consider what occurs when we participate in books studies or Bible studies; specifically, I can refer to our current study on White Privilege and Racism. Such studies give us the opportunity to bat around whatever topic is raised by the chapter or curriculum that week, and we're fortunate when we hear a Bible verse or two connected to the topic that we hadn't considered in that context before. But if that is all that happens, the study really hasn't had its intended effect, has it? Most of the time, book studies and curriculums are written in the hope that we students will internalize some principle or Bible concept so that when something happens in our lives to which the principle applies, we will have the divine guidance we need.

Unfortunately, such "internal applications" cannot be written into the curriculum. They really only happen as a result of prayer on the part of each participant. It would be useful to our spiritual lives, therefore, to start each study session with the prayer, "**Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths.**"

To picture even better what this means, it is helpful to go back to the first line of this psalm. It starts, “To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.” In Israel at the time this psalm was composed, *stretching out one’s hands with palms upward* was a typical posture of entreaty or request in prayer, much as it still is today. To say that one is lifting up one’s soul was to say that the *inward* posture matches that outward one. It was a way of saying that one was pleading from the heart, that one was holding up one’s whole being for the help of the Lord.

The psalmist then adds, “O my God, in you I put my trust,” which is verbal way of expressing what the posture of the hands and the soul is conveying. The psalmist is trusting that the **instruction** of the Lord will be what is needed to learn the necessary lessons of life without attending the school of hard knocks.

We, too, can hear some instruction from this psalm about not learning things the hard way:

For one thing, this psalm tells us that some spiritual learning is **gained through recognition** that it is **easy** to go the wrong way. Thus, in verse 7, the psalmist prays that God will not “remember the sins of [his] youth or [his] transgressions.” Again, in verse 11, he prays that God will pardon his guilt. Recognizing that we are capable of going the wrong way, of making the selfish choice, of failing to be loyal to our loved ones, and so on, is the ground for “teachableness.”

For another thing, this psalm tells us that some spiritual learning is **gained through prayer**. When the psalmist is seeking instruction in faith, he goes to a teacher, but when he is seeking to know the things of God on a heart level, he goes to God, lifting up his heart.

In other words, there is some sense of what it means to be God’s --- something that is not gained from human teachers. There are some aspects of oneness with God that do not come by reason, research or instruction. They must come directly from God, who is more than ready to give them. But we must be willing to receive them. We must have our antenna aimed where God’s is sending. We must be tuned in to it, which is another way of saying we need to be teachable.

The need for divine instruction is part of what it means to be dependent upon God. Our prayer-life is incomplete unless, from time to time, we are praying from the heart “Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths.” If God’s ways are to inform our lives, we need to be receptive to what God is telling us.

And lastly, this psalm tells us that some spiritual learning is **gained through self-examination**. In verse 9, the psalmist says that God “teaches the humble what is right.” And, what does it mean to be humble but that one is willing to consider that one’s own insights are not the last word on every matter. Thus the humble are willing to examine themselves. The humble are willing to be wrong.

That means, when we come to the end of a Bible lesson, a book study class or a sermon, our thought ought to be not merely whether it was a good lesson or sermon, but also, “Does it apply to me?”

One of my mentoring pastors back in Illinois said that at the end of every sermon, one should ask, “So, what?” In other words, having heard the sermon, or discussed the book study lesson or read the chapter, what am I supposed to do? How does it apply to me?

Of course, it is always possible to continue to learn some things the hard way. But “hard” means painful, costly, a cause for regret, damaging to ourselves and to others, a passel of unpleasant, and in some cases, *deadly* consequences.

So...you can be stubborn and wind up on a beach covered in fish vomit or how much better to pray *and take it to heart when you say*, “Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths.”

AMEN