

Goodson Chapel

September 16, 2009

Prov 1:20-33, **Psalm 19**, James 3 1-12, **Mark 8:27-38**

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There are a few moments in Scripture that speak very directly to the particular vocation that we in this Chapel share, the vocation of studying “the things of God” (Mark 8:33). There are just a few passages that specifically locate the life of a divinity student (or teacher) within the divine economy, and they are for us the pearl beyond price. Psalm 19 is one of those; it is the meditation and prayer of a Torah scholar. I offer it to you today with the hope that you might make it your own while you are in this place. The encouragement we get from this psalm is not just welcome but essential for many or most of us, because our vocation to study the things of God does not have a recognized or valued place in our larger culture. I don’t know how it is for you, but most of my family and friends outside the world of theological education don’t really get what we are about here. “Mastering divinity” – now there is a nebulous goal, if ever there was one. Certainly most of my homefolks, even those who are churchgoers, do not understand how studying theology and trying to interpret God’s word responsibly can be so exacting, so time-consuming, let’s face it – so hard. And the same lack of comprehension is found even within church leadership. I dare say many of us wandered through the doors of this place, or one like it, because some mentor in the church encouraged us to think we had a gift for ministry – but never thought to mention that getting *out* these doors with degree in hand would require the hardest work we had ever done in our lives.

So is it happenstance or is it grace that this Torah psalm appears in the lectionary now, a few weeks into the academic year – just as some of you are beginning to get a sense of what you have gotten yourself into, and are struggling not to be overwhelmed? Others of you might have a somewhat different problem. Perhaps you had a field education placement this summer and are now suffering some degree of culture shock, as you sense that the robust intellectual life you are cultivating here is not just undervalued in the local church but even at odds with what many people want from you. Maybe you wonder if it is at odds with what you want from yourself. “What exactly is the point of all this study? Surely this is not what the church is about!” It is a question I have often heard posed, directly or indirectly, by those who dare to be honest, including some my students. Often enough I have posed it in my own mind. It is exactly 30 years ago that I began studying “divinity,” and I could not count the number of times I have wondered if this work has to be as hard as it is for me, if I am missing some obvious shortcut that would free up time for me to play golf or knit or something similarly befitting my age.

Therefore it is some comfort and substantial help that the inspired theologian-poet who gave us Psalm 19 seems to have pondered and maybe struggled with the question, “What is the point of all this study?” We could profitably spend a whole semester doing spiritual exegesis of the answer this ancient Torah scholar gives, which (if we can comprehend it) is enough to sustain us through a lifetime of studying the things of God. But we have just ten more minutes this morning, so let’s get started.

Three points, and the first is this: **We study the things of God in order to regain the health of our souls.** Listen carefully to how the Psalmist puts it in v 8. תורת יי תמימה משיבת נפש. “The Torah

of YHWH is wholesome, restoring life.” “Restoring life,” משיבת נפש – in the book of Ruth the same phrase describes what happens to old, ravaged Naomi, when at last she holds her little grandson in her arms (4:15); she was dead, and now she is alive. That is the state that the psalmist envisions for us as we study God’s word. we had lost the power of life, but now Torah restores it to us. It’s an exceedingly strong statement, but what does it mean, in real time, in our lives? It was different with Naomi, she felt that she was dead inside, and at one time or another probably most of us have felt that way too, but not necessarily now. And even if we do feel that way, how does *study* help restore us to life?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, that luminous teacher of the last century, says this about the experience of religious inspiration: “There is no [one] who is not shaken for an instant by the eternal” (*Man Is Not Alone*, 79). We have all been touched by God, and thus given the power of life, but to our shame, we are all also “tainted with oblivion.” Over and over we forget what we have experienced of God. And so we study in order to remember, to renew our contact with the power of life. Contact with the power of life – that is what the church has traditionally called “the authority of Scripture.” The Latin word *auctoritas*, “authority,” denotes the power held by some individual or body – the Roman senate, say *Auctoritas* is the power to direct the actions of another, to lay claim to their property – at the limit, the power to lay claim to their life. By analogy, that is the kind of authority Scripture holds for us. As an agent of God’s power, it directs our action and lays claim to our life for God. Scripture lays a claim on our life even as it restores us to the fullness of life. To paraphrase Heschel, Torah, God’s teaching, is “an island across the restlessness of time, to which we move over the wake of undying wonder” (ibid.) Here is the point for all who pore over Scripture: *Undying wonder is the primary exegetical skill.*

A second insight of our Psalmist: **We study in order to experience life’s sweetness.** God’s Torah, the written record of God’s judgments, is “sweeter than honey, the most delectable of honeys.” (v 11) – “quintessence of bees,” in Robert Alter’s lovely translation. So think “baklava” as you study; studying the things of God is honey in your mouth, as purely sweet as life gets. But. .*but* the sweetness of study does not come easily. Harvesting honey is not child’s play; it takes a lot of skill to extract the treasure from the hive, and you can expect some stings along the way. So the Psalmist tells us, in effect: “Keep your eye on the prize: your study is aiming at the most exquisite delight, and don’t let anything deprive you of that honey.”

Alas, there are a lot of bees buzzing around a place like this, looking for unprotected places in your soul to land their stingers. Let’s name some of those bees and decipher their buzz:

- *Despair*, that’s one persistent bee, and its buzz is this: “I can’t do this.” Worse: “I will never be able to do this. I don’t care what my teacher says; this is too hard for me and I am not going to try.” Lose that bee.
- The bee of despair flies with another bee, *competitiveness*, which has the complementary buzz: “I have to do this better than anyone else.” Sadly, competitiveness makes us believe that we can only do this well if someone else is doing it. .not so well. Competitiveness flies with despair; it depends on despair, for its buzz is this: “In order to feel my joy, I need to show that she/he is inadequate.” Lose that bee.
- *Distraction*, this is a third bee determined to keep us from the honey. The bee of distraction might come from any of several directions in our lives: from a long history of not internalizing discipline, or from a clinical disorder. A measure of distraction might

even reflect a very laid-back personality, which could in certain respects be a refreshing change around here. Surely distraction comes to all of us from our noisy newsy culture. Email is a primary symbol – or rather, symptom – of the distraction that plagues us all, buzzing in our faces from morning till late at night, trying to keep us from getting the honey out of our study. We will not get to “taste and see that YHWH is good” (Ps. 34:9), unless we manage to lose that bee.

A third point from our psalm: **We study God’s word in order to participate in a community where the truth may be spoken and heard.** For this psalmist, Torah is like the sun, that most outstanding feature of the Middle-Eastern environment. Like the sun, Torah מאירת עיניים; it provides “light for the eyes” (v. 9). It makes visible what is there but otherwise not seen. Like the sun, Torah enables us to see the things we stumble over in the dark – that is, the truth about ourselves. Accordingly, in this small liturgy that is our psalm, a Torah hymn leads into a confession of sin:

Unwitting sins, who can discern?
Cleanse me from hidden faults.
Keep me away from the presumptuous;
do not let them exercise influence over me. (vv. 13 - 14)

“Unwitting sins, who can discern?” The implied answer is no one – no matter how young and promising, no matter how old and experienced. We are all liable to be exposed by the light of Torah as young and foolish, or old and overconfident. Indeed, the only way not to be a fool is to reject the way of the presumptuous, humbly confessing the blindness that afflicts us all, asking God to heal the brokenness we cannot even see.

Psalm 19 is not the prayer of the complacent. It is the humble prayer of someone who knows herself to be vulnerable as she makes the journey into God – a journey that is inevitably enlightening if we stay the course, yet also attended by dangers. What the psalm tells us is that in the godly person, humility and dignity coincide. Humility is nothing other than the well-worn path leading ever deeper into God’s mercy. And dignity is the status that derives from acknowledging God’s redemptive mercy. This we know from our psalmist’s final words, which name God as צורי וגואלי, “my Rock and my Redeemer” (v. 15).

We’ve only just begun to probe the depths of this prayer, yet already it is evident that Torah study is not merely a *phase* of life, a hoop to jump through on the way to some greater goal, such as ordained ministry or a teaching post. Rather, setting our minds on the things of God is the *way* of life for us – indeed for every Christian. As our Lord tells Peter in the Gospel passage we have just heard, we know who Jesus is only by setting our minds on the things of God. The people whom you will serve will be able to set their minds on God, and want to set their minds on God, only to the extent that they see in and through you the incomparable sweetness of dwelling on the word of God. May we grow each of us in humility and dignity, and thus become a true witness to the sweetness of Torah. Amen.