

**Life's Turnarounds**  
Sermon on Psalm 30  
Sunday July 8, 2007  
Trinity United Ottawa  
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*"You have turned my mourning into dancing." Ps 30:11*

A couple of weeks ago, Bob and I went to see "Away From Her" a very moving new Canadian film that I think would touch many of your hearts too. It stars Gordon Pinsent and it's about two older couples living with Alzheimers disease. As I read our Psalm 30, I thought of a scene from this movie, where the two well spouses were celebrating finding surprising new joie de vivre in their companionship. The woman, who had become quite sad and cynical as her husband's dementia narrowed her existence, unexpectedly found herself laughing and taking delight in life. Driving along in the car with Pinsent to visit their spouses at the Senior's Residence, she exclaimed: "Whoever would have thought back then that I would be happy like this again now!"

Life is full of joyous reversals. Sad times turned upside down like smiles formed from frowns. Such is the way of a loving God in our lives. The Psalmist, who had previously been so self confident and self assured as to neglect God, enjoins us never to forget that our life is not just of our making, but also of our Creator's giving. As one who was snatched from death's doorstep by the grace of God, he calls us to join him in continuous praise, so we will always remember and recognize God's healing role in our lives.

Along with this wise reminder, the psalmist illustrates a misguided norm of human relationship with God, as the psalms often do. According to the theology of his times, this composer saw God as turning his face away - God as the source of his suffering as punishment - followed by deliverance. Today, with the corrective of Jesus' theology of an unconditionally loving and forgiving God, we understand that God doesn't inflict suffering to teach us painful lessons- we humans manage to do

that for ourselves and each other all too well. What causes most of our suffering is not God, but our attitudes and habits of disconnecting from God and Creation.

Its hard for us to give up the habit of seeing God as the source of suffering though. People in our tradition still presume God is punishing them with suffering, and instinctively begin to plea bargain like guilty children with this cruel parent God: “God if you’ll get me out of this, I promise I’ll worship you forever, ” Did you hear the psalmist negotiating? “I’m no good to you dead, and if you let me live, I’ll give you good P.R.! Lots of public praise.” As if God needed our praise! As if God didn’t offer us all the gifts of life freely! But I guess trying to make a deal with God still makes *us* humans feel better!

Hopefully over time, praying our way closer to Jesus’ God of love and forgiveness, we the faithful learn to recognize that God’s loving power is there for us - no matter what we do. God’s given love is the through-line of our life stories, no matter how often suffering is woven in. Alas, most of us have to learn this through repeated experience of acute suffering followed by even sweeter celebrations. Gradually our faith and conviction that God is only yearning for our happiness, deepens.

Our corporate worship reinforces this central theme of our faith. Hearing the resurrections stories over and over again, and the likes of our psalmist’s turnaround, drags our hearts and minds out of the solitude of our own self-centred suffering, to a broader and brighter perspective. We can see our woes writ smaller and only momentary, a tiny part of the all encompassing cycles of death and resurrection in our Creator’s world. Eugene Peterson, who wrote the contemporary versions of the psalms that we are reading this month, defines worship as “ the strategy by which we interrupt our preoccupation with ourselves, and attend to the [loving] presence of God.”

With worship-heightened awareness of a healing energy so much bigger than ourselves, we begin to perceive the hopeful potential in even our darkest times. Our

psalms and stories remind us to seek the learnings and meanings in our suffering, and to greet the first signs of the turnaround that is surely coming. With well trained faith, experiences that might appear to be just punishing, are more readily interpreted as challenges that will strengthen us. We look for the gifts in our struggles and in this process, discover that our struggling is actually diminished.

To make these words and ideas real, of course you have to relate them to your own life. Can you recall a time when your mourning turned to dancing? Was there ever a life wound that turned out to be the launching pad for you to find some new fulfillment? How has the Spirit of Love transformed your pain into joy, so that you couldn't help but praise God and give thanks?

When suffering time comes round again, as it inevitably will in all our lives, hopefully worship will remind you to remember your own resurrection evidence. Perhaps then you will suffer less, before God's salve of hope begins to turn your situation around.

Faith in God's healing love is not easy learning, nor alas, permanent. It needs to be regularly refueled - I'd say every Sunday. In spite of my faith-bred optimism, four summers ago when my Mika's life seemed in the balance, I let myself get swamped by anxiety and paint my whole life with despair. For a while I couldn't see ahead to how I would ever be happy again. As I worked feverishly to find help that would save her, I neglected to trust that love would save us both.

But then, in the great blessing of this ministry work, that constantly lays the wisdom of scripture before me and backs me up with the loving prayers of this congregation, I began to perceive that I was not alone or unique in the struggle for my daughter's recovery. I started to recognize all the helpers who came our way as fellow travellers and as angels. I started to trust that the angel we needed at each turn in the dark road, would appear just in time to lead us back toward the light. And they did!

You've heard my gushing maternal pride in Mika's recovery and accomplishments, and seen how overjoyed I now am with my special relationship with my Wondergirl. So you know that my mourning has turned to dancing. And some of you know that our time of trial has seeded a personal ministry for me in supporting families of teens with addictions. A very fulfilling sideline that is now intersecting our church work, as Church in Society joins forces with Rideauwood Addictions counselling and supports the Ottawa Integrated Drug & Addictions strategy. I'm excited about what we can do together to help at risk families. Do you see how, once again, out of suffering has come the gift of a unimagined new joy in life. Joie de vivre.

A friend said to me last month when we celebrated Mika's graduation and 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, "Who would have imagined four years ago that you and she would be in this happy place today?!"

God would have. So maybe next time I'll be watching for the God perspective sooner. Maybe I'll catch myself mid-moan with the thought that present hardship will pass and the turnaround is coming, because in the midst of suffering, God is with us.

I like the statement of faith St Julian of Norwich wrote centuries ago: "If there be anywhere on earth where a lover of God is always kept safe from falling, I know nothing of it, for it was not shown to me. But this was shown: that in the falling and rising again, we are always kept in the same precious love."

In thanks and in faith, let us accept the ancient psalmist's invitation. Join in singing together our praise for the God who turns our mourning into dancing, whose love is for a lifetime.

VU # 658 O Love the Wilt Not Let Me Go