



Leave it There

Psalm 55:12-23

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February 6, 2022

It is February, a month that is designated as Black History Month. As many have stated before, Black History is American History, and perhaps we shouldn't be limiting such studies to just 28 days. Yet, given the designation, appropriate that our current worship focus has us looking at the life and hymns of the Rev. Charles A. Tindley, a black preacher from Maryland who served as a Methodist pastor in, among other places, Philadelphia, where the church he helped grow and build still exists today, known as Tindley Temple United Methodist Church. Rev. Tindley served the church from 1902-1932, during which time the church grew from less than 50 members to over 10,000. The church moved twice during his tenure, the second move in 1924 was into the still existing building, which includes a sanctuary space that seats over 3,000 persons. The history of the church indicates that the congregation – made up predominantly of low-income people of color and immigrants – was able to cover the cost of the building, some \$350,000 in 1920, without any fundraisers or capital campaigns. It was the general tithing of the church that allowed for the purchase of the property and the construction of the building.

Rev. Tindley, whom we are focusing on as a hymn writer, didn't just write good music, he was a powerful preacher and a community-focused pastor. As Kim shared in our small group gathering last Sunday afternoon in conversation with the members of Roberts, in the construction of Tindley Temple, Rev. Tindley insisted the church be built on ground level with no stairs leading into the building. He wanted to ensure that the physical structure was built in such a way that no one – regardless their physical ability – was hindered from entering and participating in worship. He truly believed in a church where everyone was invited and able to share, so much so that it was embodied in the structure itself.

This morning's hymn, *Leave it There*, comes from one of Rev. Tindley's pastoral encounters. As recorded in a biography written by his youngest son, a man came to the church one day to meet with Rev. Tindley. "[The man] told of his heavy burdens which were becoming more than he could bear thus seeking [Rev. Tindley's] council and advice. ... Pastor Tindley having many times been confronted with the same situation, advised him, 'go home and secure a large sack, then get all of your troubles together and name each one as you drop them in, to be sure that none is forgotten. Get it up on your shoulder and go upstairs away from everyone. When this is done, sling that burden down at the feet of Jesus, and leave it there.'"ⁱ Tindley's son indicates that when the man had gone, Rev. Tindley pulled out a sheet of paper and wrote this hymn, *Leave it There*.

Tindley's invitation is one that mimics the words of the Psalmist. For as much praise and joy as the Psalms offer in their prose, they are just as much filled with words of lament, offering on behalf of the Psalmist words of anguish and disgust, of pain and retribution.

I have heard this a number of times, where someone is upset, angry at God ... or a friend ... or a situation ... and another person of good faith tries to drop a platitude on them, saying, "It's ok, God will take care of you. There's no need to be so angry." *Friends, voicing our anger is part of our faith tradition.* The scripture don't just invite us to voice our anger, it give us the words to use in moments of such trouble.

Psalm 55 opens up with the Psalmist offering words of complaint against the brokenness of society at large. The Psalmist offers in the first half of this Psalm, prior to our reading this morning, "My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me. ... Confuse, O Lord, confound their speech; for I see violence and strife in the city. Day and night they go around it on its walls, and iniquity and trouble are within it; ruin is in its midst; oppression and fraud do not depart from its market place."

The Psalmist is lamenting the evil that exists within the community at large. Perhaps that is a sentiment to which you can relate. Perhaps you see all too well first hand, through work or personal endeavor, the ways in which society is filled with violence and strife. Perhaps you have encountered the iniquities of our society for yourself. Perhaps you can bear witness to the ways our capitalistic society – our modern-day market place equivalent – is filled with oppression and fraud.

If you have ever bemoaned the brokenness of our societal structures, you are in good company with the Psalmist. We are not invited in the scriptural text to just accept the corruption of society as "the way it is." In the writings of the Psalmist, we are given, not just permission, but the words to use in our disgust of the society around us.

Yet, the Psalmist indicates it is not just the society at large that is the problem. The Psalmist makes it personal. Our text this morning, beginning in verse 12, opens with the Psalmist writing, "It is not enemies who taunt me – I could bear that; it is not adversaries who deal insolently with me – I could hide from them. But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend, with whom I kept pleasant company; ... Let death come upon *them*; let them go down alive to Sheol; for evil is in their homes and in their hearts."

Don't gloss over this: the Psalmist is damning their close friend and companion to experience the pain associated with the torment of hell – to go *alive* down to *Sheol* – the place of Satan.

Tell me again how the Scriptures insist we have to be cordial with another? Not only is the Scripture not being cordial, the Psalmist is inviting God's eternal punishment upon someone with whom he has been very close in relationship.

As I was reading the scripture this past week, a prayer came to mind. This prayer, titled "Prayer of a Weary Black Woman," written by Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes, made a lot of news last year when it was first published in a book of prayers titled "The Rhythm of Prayer."ⁱⁱ The prayer made headlines primarily because a lot white people felt attacked. See, the prayer begins with the opening petition, "Dear God, Please help me to hate White People."

Like the Psalmist in their prayer of lament, Dr. Walker-Barnes was offering a petition of angst and pain.

Also, like the Psalmist, Dr. Walker-Barnes makes a distinction in her prayer about specifically whom she is speaking. She goes through a variety of persons, saying, “I am not talking about the White antiracist allies ... who are so committed to fighting White supremacy that their own lives bear the wounds of its scars.” She also says, “I’m not even talking about the ardent racists ... who open fire on Black churchgoers, or who plot acts of racial terrorism hoping to start a race war.”

Like the Psalmist, Dr. Walker-Barnes specifies that it is not the larger society of people who carry the weight of her disgust. She specifies, like the Psalmist, that it is not the enemies or adversaries, but her companions, the equals, those with whom she keeps pleasant company. She writes, “My prayer is that you would help me to hate the other White people – you know, the nice ones. ... The people who are happy to have me over for dinner but alert the neighborhood watch anytime an unrecognized person of color passes their house. ... The people who politely tell us that we can leave when we call out the racial microaggressions we experience in their ministries. ... Those whose unexamined White supremacy bubbles up at times I’m not expecting it, when I have my guard down and my heart open.”

Dr. Walker-Barnes laments the real and tangible pain that comes through relationships with those who do not see the ongoing, systemic, and tangible racial inequity present in our nation. She is asking for God to allow her to have hate for those who harm her with their words and actions. She is lamenting and naming her pain, and inviting God to be present in her anger – a practice used often by the Psalmist.

It is the pain of our everyday lives that the Psalmist is offering in Psalm 55 as a witness in complaint before God. It is the pain of our real, lived experiences that cuts the closest to the heart. It is not the blatant acts of evil that hurt us most, as devastating as they are, it is the unexpected lack of faithfulness from those with whom we are most closely associated that carries the greatest burden.

This is the prayer of the Psalmist. “My companion laid hands on a friend and violated a covenant with me with speech smoother than butter, but with a heart set on war; with words that were softer than oil, but in fact were drawn swords.”

It is not the blatant hatred of those *overt* in their prejudice that the Psalmist laments; it is the friend who speaks as if everything is ok, but whose actions are as one who does not understand the tyranny of their own existence. The scholar, James L. Mays, reminds us that even “Jesus knew the anguish of betrayal by one who belonged to his own circle, and the anguish in the language of the psalm tells us how the betrayal hurt.”

It is part of the practice of our faith to offer our lament before God. And though we often limit our lament to the spiritual forces of wickedness in the world, especially in communities of privilege where the greatest assault on our personal self is the threat of less privilege, it is common of the Psalmist and of the saints of our faith to come before the Lord with prayers that name the physical pains of life. Whether the pains are brought upon us by another, or experienced in the society at large, we have a witness in our ancestors of the faith that guides and instructs our petitioning before God.

In Tindley's hymn, these concerns are named as real and tangible burdens. "If the world withhold from you its silver and gold, and you have to get along with meager fare." ... "If your body suffers pain and your health you can't regain, and your soul is sinking in despair." ... "When your enemies assail and your heart begins to fail, don't forget that God in heaven answers prayer." ... "When your youthful days are gone and old age is stealing on, and your body bends beneath the weight of care." ... Tindley is not offering lament of spiritual woes; Tindley is talking about the real and tangible challenges of human life – of corporate life – of systemic and societal brokenness that impacts one's personal life and the life of community at large.

Remember, Tindley was preaching in a low-income community. His hymns take root from his pastoral experience. The community at Tindley's church was diverse in its racial and ethnic identity, but it shared a commonality in facing real financial challenges. Things like food and healthcare would have been a common concern. To sing this hymn with integrity, we must acknowledge the pains of these petitions are real – even if they are not our personal pains. These are pains that are experienced daily by those in our community even still today. And as the apostle Paul says, when anyone suffers we all suffer, for we are all connected as the Body of Christ.

The petitions of the hymn become our own through our incorporation into something greater than our individual selves – these are the prayers and laments of our neighbor, of our siblings, of our community. Whether the prayer is for alleviating suffering and pain, or for God's condemnation of a friend, or even for God's willingness to let us hate the other, the pain is real – the suffering is present – the brokenness is tangible. And as a community connected by the love of God, we share in this pain together.

We share in the pain, we share in the lament, **and** we share in the hope.

These three prayers, the prayer of the Psalmist, the Prayer of Dr. Chanequa Walker-Barnes, and the prayer found in the hymn of Rev. Charles Tindley all conclude in agreement.

The Psalmist, at the conclusion of asking for God's negative actions on their friend, offers in verse 22, "Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved." Dr. Walker-Barnes, at the conclusion of asking God for a heart to hate, offers in conclusion, "I will trust in you, my Lord. You have kept my love and my hope steadfast even when they have trampled on it. ... You have lifted my head when it was low and healed my heart when it was wounded." And Rev. Tindley, having named the physical burdens of life, offers in refrain, "Leave it there; take your burden to the Lord and leave it there. If you trust and never doubt, he will surely bring you out; take your burden to the Lord, and leave it there."

We take the prayers of the people, whether of the Psalmist or of Saints past and present, before the Lord in full trust and confidence that the Lord will sustain us. We have a hope in the promise of Christ that God is working in and through us so that we can see justice, that we can alleviate the brokenness, and that we can change the broken systems and structures of society to allow for a greater peace and joy across the broad spectrum of humanity.

We have a belief in the hope of God in Jesus Christ, that we are not alone in our journey, but that we can come before the Lord with all of our burdens and be confident that the Lord will remove them from our path. We have an assurance that the divine will of God heals the broken, gives life to the dying, reconciles the divided, and leads us into a greater witness of human flourishing as God-ordained in creation.

So as we sing this hymn today, you are invited to join your voice, claiming as a joint witness of God's love in creation that the burdens we bring before the Lord can be laid at Jesus' feet, entrusting that God is working in us, through us, and for us that these burdens will be no more – claiming that when we trust and never doubt, God will surely bring us out. Let us bring our burden to the Lord, and leave it there.

ⁱ E. T. Tindley. *The Prince of Colored Preachers: The Remarkable Story of Charles Albert Tindley of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*. Wilmore, KY: First Fruits Press, 2016.

ⁱⁱ *The Rhythm of Prayer: A Collection of Meditations for Renewal*. Ed. Sarah Bessey. New York: Convergent Books, 2020.