

THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Year B

February 5, 2012

Psalm 147

1 Corinthians 9:16-23

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Any dog owner knows that dogs sense things in the air—or on the ground—that we neither see nor smell. We have a dog named Sally. Just the other day it happened again. We were walking along the sidewalk next to our house, and Sally just stopped—she stopped and lifted her nose in the air. It was no use to try to urge her along. She was on to something that I had no clue about. There was nothing to do but to stand there and wait for her encounter with this imperceptible effervescence to conclude.

I've been in shock and deep grief all week. Just last week, I learned that one of my seminary classmates died at age 51, leaving behind his wife and two daughters, still living at home. Eric was 35 when he married Lisa, so the girls are still young. I always admired Eric in seminary. He was young and bright, one of the brightest in our class. I always imagined him as a seminary professor or a bishop. He had a quiet charm about him that was very endearing. Because I was married with three children and living in an apartment at the far end of the seminary campus, and Eric was barely out of college and living in the dorm in the heart of the campus, we did not see each other very much, and I could not claim that we were particularly close. I was always wishing for the opportunity to know him better. Eric was a pastor at a large church in Hagerstown, Maryland. Eric committed suicide just before Thanksgiving. According to what I have learned since then, Eric suffered from depression that had recently been diagnosed. In our family, we know something about the excruciating pain of depression and the temptation to suicide.

So it is that the antiphon for our psalm for today has been singing through my mind and my heart all week: "The Lord heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds" (Psalm 147:3). I pray for my broken heart to be healed; I pray for Eric's wife, Lisa's heart to be healed. I only wish that Eric's broken heart might have been healed before he took such drastic action.

I've gone to the website of the congregation Eric served. On the surface, it's a thriving congregation with a vital ministry, particularly noted for its fine tradition of music. I wonder if Eric tried to take on too many things. I thought about Eric as I consider the Apostle Paul's words to the church in Corinth from our Second Lesson today: "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22b). I wonder if Eric tried to be all things to all people to the point where he lost himself.

I went to the website that handled the arrangements for Eric's funeral. On it there is a link to a photo slide show, photos mostly of his family. How happy that all were, or appeared

to be, at least. Accompanying the slide show is a song by Leonard Cohen, sung by K.D. Lang, called “Hallelujah.” (Many people know of the song from the movie *Shrek*.) At first it struck me as odd that this song should have been chosen. I wondered, was the song a favorite of Eric’s? Or his wife, Lisa? I wondered how the song spoke to them or of this tragic situation. I studied the lyrics. The singer sings Hallelujah—Praise God—not from a situation of triumph or of glory, not of exuberant, unbounded joy, but rather the singer sings Hallelujah out of brokenness and failure. One verse sings of David seeing Bathsheba bathing on the roof, of Sampson (though not named) enticed by Delilah (also unnamed), who cuts his hair. The final words sing: “It’s not somebody who’s seen the light; It’s a cold and it’s a broken Hallelujah.”

Eric sang his Hallelujah not as someone who’s seen the light, but rather as one in the midst of darkness and despair. His was a broken Hallelujah. But it was Hallelujah, nevertheless.

We sponsored a workshop, the Concordia Institute for Liturgy and Music Ministry, here yesterday morning for church musicians and worship leaders from our synod and our neighbor synod to the east in Wisconsin. The focus of the event was on singing the psalms. I told a story at the beginning, after we had sung Morning Prayer, about the visit of American writer Marilynne Robinson to Duluth in May 2010. At her lecture at the College of St. Scholastica, she posed the question, “Who are we as human beings?” Raised in a Christian household, she turned to the psalms for the answer to her question, to Psalm 8, where the psalmist asks, “. . . what are mere mortals that you should be mindful of them, human beings that you should care for them?” The psalmist goes on to answer the question, “Yet you have made them little less than divine; with glory and honor you crown them.” Two weeks ago we sang in another psalm, “For you yourself created my inmost parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb” (Psalm 139:13). To Marilynne Robinson’s question, “Who are we as human beings?,” the psalmists reply, “We are created by God, crowned with glory and honor.”

It was a Saturday night when Marilynne Robinson came to Duluth, and I had just finished writing my sermon for the next morning. The texts included Psalm 148, one of the Hallelujah psalms that conclude the 150 psalms in our Psalter. Psalm 148 sings,

Hallelujah! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise God in the heights. . . .
young men and maidens, old and young together.
Let them praise the name of the Lord . . .

During the question and answer period that followed the lecture, I suggested that, while the question “Who are we as human beings?” is deeply significant, perhaps the more important question might be “What are we for? What is our purpose?” I suggested that perhaps Psalm 148 gives us the answer: Our purpose is to praise God. I might appeal again to the psalm we sang two weeks ago, Psalm 139, which goes on to sing, “I will thank [insert *praise*] you because I am marvelously made; your works are wonderful, and I know it well” (Psalm 139:14). Perhaps even more important than the question, “Who are we?,” is “What are we for?” We are created for praise of God.

That brings me back to my seminary classmate, Eric. What does it mean to sing, “It’s a cold and it’s a broken Hallelujah”? I think that Eric, or his wife, Lisa, are inviting us, regardless of our circumstances in life, no matter how dark, to sing Hallelujah.

One of my favorite journals arrived at our house yesterday, *The Christian Century*, and, typically, Lynn got to it before I did. When I got home yesterday afternoon, Lynn opened to an article and said, “Here, read this.” I have learned over the years that when Lynn says, “Here, read this,” that I ought to sit right down and read it, not later, but right now. And I have also learned over the years that when Lynn says, “Here, read this,” it’s always something worthwhile and something I need to learn—or at least something *she* thinks I need to learn. Yesterday, she was right, again. She always is.

The article is written by a pastor who also teaches at a seminary in Pittsburgh. I heard him speak this past May in the Cities as part of the Festival of Homiletics. He was writing about the notion of the pastor as the shepherd of the congregation. He writes: “I have always been uneasy with thinking of myself as the shepherd of our congregation. That role belongs to Jesus Christ.”¹

As I read, I thought about my classmate Eric. I wondered if, in trying to be all things to all people, he was expecting too much of himself. Or perhaps he may have been allowing his people to expect too much from him. I wished that Eric might have read those words of wisdom before he took his life.

The author continues, “I’ve learned that it’s far more helpful to think of myself as a sheepdog that nudges sheep toward the only Savior of the flock.”² That reminds me of my dog Sally and our recent walk along the sidewalk outside our house. She stopped in her tracks and lifted her nose into the air. She was on to something that I had not clue about. There was something in the air.

I wonder if this might be a metaphor for ministry, of being the one who stops in the midst of all the activity, the one who is aware that there is something in the air, that there is more than meets the eye, that grace abounds, that the love of God is with us, even when we are not aware of it, perhaps even *especially* when we are not aware of it. I wonder if a metaphor for ministry might be the one who has ears to hear the ageless and endless chorus of all the angels and archangels, the cherubim and seraphim, and all those countless souls without number who have gone before us, singing the great heavenly chorus, “Hallelujah.”

While those of us still here on this earth utter our feeble Hallelujahs, our “cold and broken” Hallelujahs, we know that we sing to our God, who heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.

Thanks be to God! Hallelujah!

¹M. Craig Barnes, “The Good Sheepdog,” *The Christian Century*, February 8, 2012, 37.

²*Ibid.*