

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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The Needy Will Not Always Be Forgotten

Psalm 9-10

In last week's sermon, we heard that when it comes to embodying and reflecting God's reconciling, restoring love for the world, we are still commanded and expected to make progress toward full maturity. That's the goal, or purpose, of our life in relationship with God, under the rule of God. "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). Those are still Jesus' words to us. And the more we obey these words, the more we will exhibit God's abundant, extravagant mercy toward others, particularly those who harm us or hate us. Jesus says, "(God) causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." In other words, God shows no partiality in his love and goodness. He deals in grace with everyone.

But all this talk about how God has no favorites doesn't mean that God is completely detached from the injustices and inequalities of life in this world. It doesn't mean that God maintains a completely neutral stance in situations where individuals and groups of people are mistreated, oppressed, or marginalized. On the contrary, the Scriptures testify that God actively and purposefully takes up the cause of those who are victimized, neglected, and powerless. In Catholic social teaching, there's a frequently used expression called "God's preferential option for the poor." It points to a trend throughout the biblical texts, where a demonstrable preference is given to powerless people who live on the margins of society.

This theme of God associating himself with and acting on behalf of the needy and the oppressed undergirds both the praises and the petitions that we hear in today's Scripture reading from Psalms 9 and 10. "The Lord reigns forever; he has established his throne for judgment. He will judge the world in righteousness; he will govern the peoples with justice. The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, O Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you" (9:7-10). These words are set within an atmosphere of song and gladness where the psalmist calls upon others to join in praising this God who is committed to justice and righteousness. Both Psalms 9 and 10 are filled with references to the "afflicted" (9:12), the "needy" (9:18), the "weak" (10:2), the "innocent" (10:8), and the "helpless" (10:9, 12). These are the ones who have God's special attention, care, and advocacy. They need to remember that God isn't indifferent toward their suffering.

And yet, there are times when it can certainly seem that way. The psalmist himself shifts from celebrating God's deliverance to petitioning God for help. In one verse the psalmist expresses confidence in God's prevailing sovereignty, but then a few verses later complains about what looks like God's absence. "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak, who are caught in the schemes he devises" (10:1-2). The reason that the psalmist's words are a mixture of confidence and complaint is because there are many things that remain unsettled, and much injustice that waits to be set right. Therefore the psalmist isn't afraid to ask the hard questions. "God, do you see what's happening down here, especially to your people? And if you do see, do you care? And if you do care, what are you going to do about it? Or are you just going to stand idly by while the helpless are destroyed and evil prevails? God, have you forgotten the needy?"

Eventually, in the course of his own praising and petitioning, the psalmist gets around to answering these questions for himself: "The Lord is known by his justice; the wicked are ensnared by the work of their hands. The wicked return to the grave, all the nations that forget God. But the needy will not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the afflicted ever perish" (9:16-18). The needy will not always be forgotten. Or as the psalmist also says, "But you, O God, do see trouble and grief; you consider it to take it in hand" (10:14a). So though outward circumstances may be saying that God is indifferent and has turned a blind eye to the helpless, the very character and purpose of God say just the opposite. God does see. God is moved. God does take up the cause of the needy. God doesn't forget them.

This is why we ourselves, who are called in Christ to embody and exhibit the righteousness of God, need to be especially attentive to those who are easily and regularly forgotten. I'm talking about people whose lives, sufferings, and struggles are often invisible, neglected and overlooked. We frequently fail to think about them, notice them, and give them the time and attention that faithfully reflects God's compassion and justice. Some of them come to our minds here this morning. The senior adult with Alzheimer's disease, and the spouse who cares for them, spending most of each day confined to their house. The young adult with a severe brain injury, unable to leave her nursing home bed. The homeless man sleeping in the shadows of a highway overpass. The severely depressed neighbor who has become more and more withdrawn. The disabled child in an impoverished country, kept in the back bedroom for fear of the community's reaction. The immigrant standing in line at a processing center, waiting to see if they've completed their form correctly. The inmate at the local jail, who rarely if ever hears from family members or friends. You could probably think of others to add to our montage of the forgotten.

Sometimes we forget them because we're so busy with many other things and many other people. Sometimes we forget them because something more entertaining and less demanding is consuming most of our attention. Sometimes we forget them because we're intentionally trying to avoid facing any more of the world's pain and suffering. Sometimes we forget them because we haven't developed the habits and spiritual disciplines that keep us alert and responsive to the struggles of the needy and the marginalized. Whatever the reasons we have neglected or forgotten them, both the confidence and the complaints of the psalmist challenge our forgetfulness and call us to remember the individuals, families, and communities whose hardships are often out of sight and out of mind.

The more we remember the needy, and the more we act upon that remembrance, the less we're vulnerable to the dangers of indifference. Back on April 12, 1999, Holocaust survivor, author, and activist Elie Wiesel gave a speech to President Bill Clinton, his wife Hillary, and members of Congress. He spoke about "The Perils of Indifference." This is part of what he said:

Of course, indifference can be tempting—more than that, seductive. It is so much easier to look away from victims. It is so much easier to avoid such rude interruptions to our work, our dreams, our hopes. It is, after all, awkward, troublesome, to be involved in another person's pain and despair. Yet, for the person who is indifferent, his or her neighbors are of no consequence. And, therefore, their lives are meaningless. Their hidden or even visible anguish is of no interest. Indifference reduces the Other to an abstraction. . . .

Indifference elicits no response. Indifference is not a response. Indifference is not a beginning; it is an end. And, therefore, indifference is always the friend of the enemy, for it benefits the aggressor—never his victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten. The political prisoner in his cell, the hungry children, the homeless refugees—not to respond to their plight, not to relieve their solitude by offering them a spark of hope is to exile them from human memory. And in denying their humanity, we betray our own.¹

The dangers of indifference. Dangers to those who are forgotten, and dangers to us who do the forgetting.

But in the life of the church, we have many traditions and practices that help us remember. In fact, much of what we do, in our worship, our work, and our witness as a congregation is geared toward memory. We're continually recalling and reflecting on what God has done for our salvation through Jesus Christ. And we're discerning the ways that we're called to take that recollection and put it into concrete action in the present, so that our lives, individually and together, faithfully represent the God who doesn't forget the helpless.

There's a lady I try to visit regularly in one of the local nursing homes. I say "try" because I don't feel like I get there to see her as often as I should. I met her when she was the roommate of someone else I was visiting. Though she is now in another room, I've tried to keep in touch. When I walk in the room, she sometimes greets me with, "Well hello, who is this stranger." And when I leave, she often sends me on my way with, "Don't be a stranger." I suppose these are affectionate and tactful ways of also saying, "Don't forget me. Don't forget who I am and where I am."

In his book, *Practical Justice*, Kevin Blue tells about a young man named Johnny who was ministering among the poor in Los Angeles. His ministry assignment included spending some time in a convalescent home in the central part of the city, where he met people whose age and condition kept them from being out and about. This segment of the poor was particularly invisible. Blue describes part of Johnny's experience this way:

This convalescent home was smelly, understaffed and poorly kept. Few residents had visitors. For a new guest arriving to serve the residents, it was very awkward. Some residents were mentally ill; some were not responsive at all. Others were even hostile. Members of Johnny's team were struggling in the first few days with why they had been called to serve there. "Why are we here?" "This is depressing." "We can't do anything to help." Such remarks began to be made openly.

One day, after Johnny had been there for about a week, an elderly woman slowly walked up to him in the hallway where he was standing. She drew close and pointed a finger at him. "I know why you're here," she said in an accusatory tone.

She paused as my friend looked at her, wondering what this was about. Realizing he didn't know what she meant, she went on. "I know why you're here," she said again. "You're here because God wants us to know he hasn't forgotten about us."²

During the course of the summer, Johnny and others on his team developed deeper relationships with the residents, relationships in which they experienced the kingdom of God. God's word to the residents was that he hadn't forgotten them. But he also had a word for Johnny. According to Blue, it was as if God said, "I have seen and remember these people who live here, in need and out of sight. I have not forgotten them. Have you?"³

The psalmist declares, "The Lord is known by his justice; . . . the needy will not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the afflicted ever perish." May God give us a steadfast commitment to justice for the helpless. May he keep our eyes open, our minds aware, and our hearts attuned to those who are in need and out of sight, so that through our lives and our witness, they may know that God has not forgotten them.

¹ Elie Wiesel, "The Perils of Indifference," www.americanrhetoric.com.

² Kevin Blue, *Practical Justice: Living Off-Center in a Self-Centered World* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 2006) 17-18.

³ Blue, *Practical Justice*, 18.