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Summer Road Trip Through the Psalms 6. Getting Surprised

Psalm 65:1-6, 9-13 The Message Silence is praise to you, Zion-dwelling God, And also obedience. You hear the prayer in it all. We all arrive at your doorstep sooner or later, loaded with guilt, Our sins too much for us-but you get rid of them once and for all. Blessed are the chosen! Blessed the guest at home in your place! We expect our fill of good things in your house, your heavenly manse... Oh, visit the earth, ask her to join the dance! Deck her out in spring showers, fill the God-River with living water. Paint the wheat fields golden. Creation was made for this! Drench the plowed fields, soak the dirt clods with rainfall as harrow and rake bring her to blossom and fruit. Snow-crown the peaks with splendor, scatter rose petals down your paths, All through the wild meadows, rose petals. Set the hills to dancing, Dress the canyon walls with live sheep, a drape of flax across the valleys. Let them shout, and shout, and shout! Oh, oh, let them sing!

Psalm 50:7-11, 23 NRSV Hear, O my people, and I will speak, O Israel, I will testify against you. I am God, our God. Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you; your burnt offerings are continually before me. I will not accept a bull from your house, or goats from your folds. For every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine... Those who bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice honor me; to those who go the right way I will show the salvation of God."

Every one who owns, or who has ever owned, a standalone GPS has at one time or another gotten the message whose picture is on our bulletin cover today: *"Recalculating."* Said in that annoying mechanical voice, it means that your GPS got surprised when you didn't follow its directions and now it has to adjust to find you a new route to wherever you are going. It happens most often when YOU get surprised on your journey through life, when you encounter unexpected roadblocks or detours or road-closed signs on your intended route in order to get to the destination you have in mind. We've all had that happen on our road trips, whether its driving across the country or across town. We've all had it happen in our journey through life. We've explored some of those unexpected detours and re-routings earlier this summer in our "road trip through the Psalms" sermon series, but getting surprised and having to

“recalculate” is such a common experience – in both travel and life – that it’s worth one more look at the topic as we near the end of this series.

When we get surprised in our travels through life, we are in good company. Whenever you eat a popsicle you are slurping on the results of a surprise when, 112 years ago, an eleven-year-old left the stirring stick for his cup of powered soft drink on his porch overnight one winter’s evening and then next morning he realized that he had surprisingly created something that would, a century, later sell two billion such inadvertently surprising frozen treats a year. Whenever you use a Post-It Note™ to mark your place in a book or leave yourself a reminder, you are using the fruits of surprise: the chemist who invented it was actually looking for a stronger glue and was initially disappointed that his effort had failed. When you stream that latest Netflix movie you are doing so because Netflix’s founder got surprised by a \$40 late fee that he was charged by a local movie rental store and so he decided to do something about it. When your doctor gives you an antibiotic you can trace his or her ability to do so to a surprise that Alexander Fleming got one morning when he examined the petri dishes he’d used the night before and, housekeeping slob that he was, delayed washing the dishes until morning whereupon he noticed that in one of the dishes the mold had killed the bacteria. And when you eat your morning Wheaties, you are consuming the results of a surprise when a cook accidentally slopped some wheat gruel (mmmm... and doesn’t that sound yummy!) on a hot stove and then tasted the results.¹

Our two Psalms for this morning may not look like they are about surprises on first blush, but they are. And they have good instruction for how we can most faithfully journey through our lives. Consider the lovely line from our first Psalm for today, where

¹For these examples and more, cf. <http://www.wisebread.com/11-famous-failures-that-led-to-success-and-the-lessons-they-teach> and <https://www.inc.com/tim-donnely/brilliant-failures/9-inventions-made-by-mistake.html> and <http://www.foxnews.com/food-drink/2013/11/12/8-famous-foods-discovered-by-mistake.html>

the writer says this about our relationship to God: *"We all arrive at your doorstep sooner or later, loaded with guilt, Our sins too much for us-but you get rid of them once and for all."* The New Revised Standard translates this in more stately language: *"When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us, you forgive our transgressions."* But why is this a surprise? Just this: So much of the rest of our lives are lived not by the patterns of grace, but by the patterns of transactions and exchanges and keeping tabs and keeping score. If you go to a bar for a drink or two, the bartender may run a tab on you – and expects you to pay up when you're done. From the time children are small, they are taught the importance of fairness, the importance of everyone getting an equal share. And anyone who has ever had two children know this is true: just try serving one of them a piece of cake that is a few millimeters smaller than the other sibling gets! This "transactional" pattern for life – with the understanding that tabs are kept and fairness is strived for – becomes ingrained in us.

But that can also hurt us in two ways. First, in our relationships, particularly with the ones we are closest to, whom we want to love the most, the transactional approach is not life-giving, but life- and intimacy-draining. When spouses start keeping score – whether it's over relative percentage of chores done or how many times who has said "I love you" or whose turn it is to do one of those distasteful household chores – it is too easy for love to get eroded, for mutual care to turn into mutual defensiveness, for score-keeping to replace joy-giving. Now, make no mistake, every marriage, every close and valued friendship, needs to have a fundamental equity as a foundation for love. Love blossoms and grows only where there is a foundation of mutual regard and respect and equity. But under the everyday pressures of life, of work, of job, of child-raising too often that equity of mutual regard and respect can too easily turn into a cycle of suspiciousness where we are always on the lookout for how we are getting less than what is fair.

And what's the second problem with the "transactional" understanding of life and relationships? Just this: fairness does not always equal equity. It's why we as a society have moral laws like the Americans With Disabilities Act because even if it were "fair" that everyone equally had to step up and down over street curbs, it's not equitable and it's not moral. It certainly doesn't fit the application of the Golden Rule. It's why we've made sure that our sanctuary has inconspicuous cutouts for the mobility-impaired who need a little more room. It might be "fair" if everyone equally had to sit in the same-size pews, but it would not be equitable and it would not be as moral as we could be. It's the reason we offer hearing assist devices to those who need them in order to be a part of worship. It's the reason that your generosity helped make possible our installation of an elevator which, while not solving all our building's accessibility problem, indicated that we weren't interested in just "fairness" where everyone had the theoretical right to access the whole building even if they couldn't. No, you wanted true equity where those who have needs that might befall any of us are helped to have the access that we truly want all to have. You see the point? An over-simple emphasis on strict fairness actually leads to a result that, in a much deeper and more moral sense, is **unfair** and **inequitable**.

All of this is why the Psalmist's assertion that "We all arrive at your doorstep sooner or later, loaded with guilt, Our sins too much for us-but you get rid of them once and for all" does indeed come as such a surprise. It's a proclamation that cuts through and goes beyond simple "fairness." It is the reminder to us that our God is a god of grace. Yet, you know what? I confess – and maybe you do too – that I'm not sure I like that sometimes. I'm much more comfortable with the "transactional" point of view; I confess I like to score-keep sometimes. What's more, I don't mind at all being the one who magnanimously forgives others (after, of course, carefully keeping score about why and how I've been "wronged") because deep down I like people being in my debt. But I

sometimes hate being the recipient of such grace and forgiveness. I look at the scorecard and know I've not measured up and am both thankful but also annoyed when people graciously forgive my screw-ups. No, I want to be the one who is doling out the grace, tearing up the scorecard (after having memorized the score, of course), and magnanimously offering forgiveness.

But God's surprising words cut through all of that and shames me for my secret score-keeping and delusions of magnanimity. In Psalm 50, our second Psalm of the morning, that's the point of the rather odd-to-our-ears emphatic pronouncement from God: *"I will not accept a bull from your house, or goats from your folds."* In other words, God is saying to God's people, *"I'm not going to be part of your score-keeping, I'm not going to play a game with you where so many bulls or so many goats or so many prayers or so many good deeds equals so many bad deeds. That is no way to live and that is not Who I am!"* Instead, in the words of one writer,

God seeks to transform human hearts from self-absorption... to compassion and peace. God seeks to accomplish this transformation through faithful relationship, not by fear-mongering coercion,² not by score-keeping, not by threat. The "faithful relationship" that God offers and will always seek to offer is one of love unconditional and grace unremitting.

So that's the "surprise" that we encounter on our journey, then – that it is grace in which we live and move and have our being and not transactional score-keeping, not just our imperfect attempts at strict fairness, not just our sometimes prideful desire to never owe anyone anything. And that should cause us, indeed, to "recalculate" ourselves. How? Well, take a look at the rest of Psalm 65; hear its words again, as it describes what God does: *"Paint[s] the wheat fields golden.... Drench[es] the plowed fields, soak[s] the dirt clods with rainfall as harrow and rake bring her to blossom and*

²<http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/8304/is-the-bible-fake-news>

fruit. Snow-crown[s] the peaks with splendor.... Set[s] the hills to dancing.” It puzzled me at first what this description of creation’s riotous beauty had to do with the Psalmist’s earlier assertion about God being a god of grace, One who forgives all transgressions, who loves and cares for each and all. But then it struck me: It’s hard to notice beauty when you are fearful. It’s hard to seek to live a beautiful life when you are afraid. Am I right? The starkly awesome majesty of the sun-scarred peaks of the Mojave Desert escaped my notice in my worry over a gas gauge needle pegging on empty and wondering whether we would make it to the next gas station in Needles. The gorgeousness of the scores of amazing drives through foothills, forests and mountain of the Front Range may be lost to your obliviousness if you are worried or fearful about something. The “purple mountain majesties” of Katherine Lee Bates’ iconic song may never get noticed if you are worried and afraid for something you’ve said or done, anxious that you’ve hurt someone, dreading that maybe this time it’s something beyond forgiveness.

But once again God asks you to “recalculate,” to pay attention to the surprise that you are being offered: a life where you indeed want to live by high standards, where you want to be moral, where you want to stop the score-keeping, where you want to go beyond over-simple fairness to true justice and equity – but one in which you are offered always and ever the grace to fail and the assurance of forgiveness. It doesn’t all depend on you and those surprises you indeed will encounter can become occasions to learn from and move forward from rather than be trapped and embittered and made fearful by.

Abraham Lincoln, himself no stranger to many failures, many surprising turns in his life, once said “My great concern is not whether you have failed, but whether you

are content with your failure.”³ My prayer this morning is that none of us will ever be content with the failures and the unwelcome surprises that come our way, for that will bar us from knowing the grace of God that forgives us and sets right, the God who will indeed “recalculate” for us a new way forward, a new way to face our fears, a new way to live life beautifully and to appreciate beauty –

- the beauty of this good earth,
- the beauty of good work to do to help lift folks out of poverty and despair,
- the beauty of seeking to overcoming racism and homophobia and all the other ism’s that so demean and destroy life,
- the beauty of seeking justice and not just fairness,
- the beauty of a life that knows the joy of being grateful for all of those opportunities,
- the beauty of a life that can say, in the face of God’s surprising and wondrous grace, “Thank you, Lord; thank you, Lord.”

It’s our prayer song this morning; will you stand and sing it with me? Number 531 in your Chalice Hymnal.

³<http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/10-famous-failures-that-will-inspire-you-succes.html>