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SERVING ATLANTA AND THE WORLD

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Crying for God

A sermon by the Rev. Canon David Boyd
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 18, Year A

My son Emory is thirty-eight days old today. Five weeks in, and I'm pleased to report that Emory is happy and healthy and so gosh darn cute. Sarah is embracing motherhood beautifully. And I love being a dad. Every day is a new adventure, a new challenge, a new joy. I learn something new every day. Something new about Emory, about Sarah, about myself, about God.

Over the last 38 days, I've learned so much.

I have learned how to hold Emory, how to keep his head supported, how to make him feel comforted and safe. I have learned how to play with him, which means holding up these black and white cards 12 inches from his face, watching him wave his arms around randomly, and improvising silly, silly songs about the many reasons he should take a nap. Perhaps most importantly, I have learned the art of changing a diaper, particularly that I need to keep a washcloth next to the changing table lest Emory spray me with a sneaky sprinkle.

I also learned how easy it is to fall in love. From the first moment I held him, looked into his brand-new eyes, and felt his finger grasping mine, I was smitten. "You are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you," God says through Isaiah. Canon Carr texted me the night Emory was born: "Welcome to a whole new level of God. This is where it really gets good." And she was so right. What a window into God's heart is parenthood! If this little tender ball of baby makes my heart sing like this, how much more precious is he to God? How much more precious am I? And you? One morning still at Piedmont Hospital, I happy-cried in the lobby Starbucks just thinking about how loved everyone is by God. Sleep deprivation hits hard.

Speaking of sleep deprivation…

I have also learned about crying. In the hospital, I made the mistake of remarking that I hadn't heard him cry much and I was looking forward to hearing what his voice sounded like. Me and my big mouth… Since then, I have indeed heard him cry. I've heard the little cries, the "neh"s and the "eh"s and the grunts and the coos. And then there's the big cry that no amount of laps around the house in my arms can soothe. I'm talking about the raw, guttural, red-face, scrunched-up, full-body scream. It doesn't sound sad. It sounds mad. It sounds like an accusation, like he is furious at me. It hurts to listen to, both physically and emotionally. It pierces my heart, my soul.

So we would go down the triage checklist. Is he hungry? No, he just had a bottle. Is he wet? No, I just changed him. Is he gassy? Probably, so we do the bicycle legs, the pats, the various techniques learned on Instagram. Maybe he's too hot, too cold, or the tag on the swaddle is bothering him, or maybe a hair is wrapped around a toe? Have you… yes! I have!

Sometimes, having done every single thing, he just screams.

And hearing it hurts. Our nerves fray, our voices sharpen. Patience runs out. One night during the first week at home, at two or three in the morning, I had reached my limit. I was tired, more than tired. Little Emory was crying, none of the usual tricks were working, and I had nothing left in the tank. I put him down in the bassinet, threw up my hands and sighed, "I can't." I walked out into the hallway, feeling like a failure. I just stood there, trying to find a deep, calm breath. Just long enough to feel like me again.

Sarah came out behind me. She rubbed my back and said, "He's not screaming at you. He's screaming for

you."

He's not crying at me. My son, who is precious in my sight, is crying for me.

That little reframe didn't make Emory stop crying. But it did let me walk back in and remain present to his tears. Whenever I find myself pushed to my limit, I go back to that moment. Sarah was right. He's reaching for me the only way he knows how, by crying.

What do you do when someone pushes you past your limit? When you try and try and still can't get someone to see reason? I'm not asking for parenting advice; this is a rhetorical question. What do you do when the person piercing your heart is not a crying baby but a selfish, stubborn, sin-sick grown up who has no intention of repentance?

Jesus says to "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

He's teaching his disciples about forgiveness, having just told a parable about a shepherd rejoicing over the return of one lost sheep to the flock. What then should we do when someone in the community sins against you? And not just someone, but a brother, a sister in Christ. So Jesus lays out a process. Go to them alone. If that doesn't work, take a couple of witnesses. If that doesn't work, take it to the church. And if that doesn't work, "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

It is a good thing to give people offramps from their personal Highway to Hell. But if they don't take the graceful exit? What if we've made sure they're fed, and dry, and not too gassy, and they're still throwing a fit? We might hear Jesus saying "three strikes and you're out." Wash your hands of them. Walk into the hallway, close the door, and don't come back.

That might have been what the disciples heard too. Tax collectors were scum, traitors on the Roman payroll, collecting money from their own people to fill their oppressors' coffers. The rabbis put them in the same category as robbers and murderers. They were barred from the synagogue. They couldn't testify in court. Lying to a tax collector wasn't even a sin. Their very touch made you unclean. And a Gentile? They were on the outside looking in. Outside the covenant, outside the promises, outside the family of Abraham. Put the two together and you've got just about the strongest way to say "outsider" that Jesus could come up with. Severe. Final. Damned, even.

But we have the advantage of being able to read the whole book. We know the rest of the story.

Back in chapter nine, Jesus walked past a tax booth and said to the man sitting there, "Follow me." The man's name was Matthew. This very teaching comes to us bearing the name of a tax collector! The story continues. That same afternoon, Jesus went to Matthew's house and ate dinner with a whole roomful of tax collectors, and when the religious folks complained, he said, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

In chapter eight, a Roman centurion, a Gentile, an officer in the occupying army, came to Jesus about his sick servant, and Jesus said he hadn't found faith like that in all of Israel.

The insult Jesus' opponents threw at him in chapter eleven was "a friend of tax collectors and sinners."

So here's the question. When the One who eats at tax collectors' houses tells you to treat someone like a tax collector, what exactly is he telling you to do?

It doesn't sound to me like he's saying that you get to be done with them. It does sound like the relationship has changed. Like the harm done has real consequences, that there should be some separation, a movement from insider to outsider. It sounds like our responsibilities have changed. But changed is not ended. We can take a break, step away, find our breath. Jesus is giving us license to maintain healthy boundaries, to tend to our wounds, to keep our communities safe. But he never licenses us to be cruel. Jesus never once treated a tax collector as a lost cause, a sheep unworthy of being sought. He went to their homes. He gave them the Good News of grace. He called them to follow him. He forgave them.

This is a hard teaching. Peter hears all this and his first question is, "But how many times should I forgive?" And Jesus tells him: seventy-seven times, which is to say, stop counting. Nobody falls forever outside the scope of grace. Not our enemies, not those whose sin screams at us, not even the Gentiles and the tax collectors. This is a really hard teaching.

It's hard because sin hurts. Betrayal hurts. Broken relationships hurt. And in our woundedness, in our

weariness, it is hard, cross-bearing work to be gracious enough, present enough, to hear in their cacophony of chaos a hunger cry for God. I can’t do it alone, none of us can. We need divine strength, divine wisdom. We need God, too.

And so I wonder about God.

I wonder how God hears us when we cry. When we cry in our suffering, I have no doubt God is grieved by that, moved by our tears, closer to us than we can imagine. But we also cry out through our sin. In our selfishness. In our stubbornness. In our cruelty to one another. We cry angry cries, accusatory cries. And so I wonder whether, even then, even at our very worst, if God hears us as crying at him.

Or if God hears us crying for him.

And if that's how God hears us, then maybe that's how we’re meant to hear those whose sin is screaming at us. Hungry for grace. Uncomfortable being stuck in the mess they’ve made. In need of some good Gospel news. Hearing it that way won't make the hurting stop, but it will help us stay present to the hope of a new day.

Amen.

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