

“Do Not Remember the Sins of My Youth”

Psalm 25:1-10
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Psalm 25 is one of the psalms of David. Its authorship is not in doubt. It is a very personal psalm. When I read through it, I feel like I am trespassing on the private thoughts of a person who is struggling to be in relationship with God. Psalm 25 reads like an entry in a personal diary, one that the author stows under his pillow at night. There is a rambling quality to the writing, as if David is talking to God in a stream of consciousness.

I was struck by verse 7 where David pleads with God, ‘Do not remember the sins of my youth.’ Though he writes this psalm well into his adult years, he is clearly troubled by unresolved issues from his teen years. I picture David remembering some of his youthful shenanigans and cringing at the thought of being held accountable. He doesn’t give us the details of what he remembers having done! Those are left to our imaginations. But can we not all relate to this plea? Oh, do not remember the sins of our youth!

The novel, Atonement, by Ian McEwan quickly comes to mind. It has been made into a terrific motion picture. In this book, the author has us focus on the telling of a blatant lie, an act of poor judgment, an expression of childishness, in the adolescent years, a lie that leads to unbearable pain for other people. The incident arises from what we might call personal insecurity or outright jealousy. The main character looks back on this incident and relives the pain she has caused. Her guilt is still with her. It is unsolved. Reading this novel is a little bit like reading Psalm 25. There is a confessional tone to it, a hoping that God will be merciful and not remember the sins of our youth forever, especially the sins that caused others great pain.

David, the psalmist, would appreciate this novel, Atonement. He would make it required reading for the Lenten season. I have a DVD of the movie version for anyone who wants to borrow it. David knows all too well what it means to be haunted by the sins of one's youth. Desperately, he does not want his adolescent foolishness to identify him forever! He wants to be free to make a new and good name for himself!

I can think of plenty of things I did in my youth I am hoping God has forgotten about long ago. I'll bet you do, too. And this is so basic to our Christian theology of redemption, to our understanding of the cross, to our belief in a God who wants only to set us free from the burdens we carry. If I could write David a letter, I would want to give him a little assurance that God does not keep a score card; that, indeed, the sins of his youth are remembered no longer.

I rejoice that in our own legal system today in America, we have a provision for youthful offenders. For those young people who have a brush with the law, there is a provision for mercy. Sometimes through community service or other arrangements, a youthful misdeed can be erased permanently from the official record. I appreciate this aspect of our legal code because it reflects a good theology; because young persons need not be identified forever by an impulsive misdemeanor. Like David, they deserve a chance to establish for themselves a good name.

One of the hardest years of our life was the year Andrea and I spent at Luke XV Home for Troubled Boys. It was a home in Leominster, Massachusetts for boys who had had a brush with the law, had been arrested for this or that. Luke XV was the last stop before doing time in a lock-up institution. Ricky had stolen a car. Jerry had stolen some clothing. Dwight had punched a younger kid in the face, knocked some teeth out. I have no idea whether our time with those boys made any difference or not.

I just remember being hopeful on their account, hopeful that they would not be labeled forever by their early disrespect for themselves and for others. Perhaps a day came for each of them when they cried out with King David, “Do not remember the sins of my youth.”

The children in our church school have been studying the Psalms over the last several weeks. I want very much for them to have an intimate relationship with Psalm 23.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

I want them to be inspired by the vision of Psalm 121.

“I lift up my eyes to the hills.”

I want them to adore the nurturing side of God revealed in Psalm 139.

“Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?”

I want them to be alive to the musical instruments used for praise mentioned in Psalm 150.

“Praise God with strings and pipe!”

AND...I want all the children to know that in Psalm 25 they can pray along side of King David, “Do not remember the sins of my youth.” It is well for a child to know that the God we worship does not keep a tally of our childhood foolishness, that no such thing need stand in the way of a relationship with a loving, reconciling God.

During this season of Lent, I commend the Psalms to our reading. They will surprise us. They will bless us. They will offer us a release from the sins of our youth. Or, I commend you to the writing of psalms during Lent. Take pen in hand as David did and just let the ink record your stream of consciousness. Be a modern day psalmist.

Let your own personal dialogue find its way onto the written page. You may want to keep it hidden under your pillow or share it with a close friend or burn it in the fireplace knowing the smoke will carry your passions all the way to heaven. If you think of a water bottle as your companion on the trail; if you think of a coffee mug as your companion for the morning; think of the Psalms as your companion for the Lenten journey. In the greatest of hope, Amen!