

## **“Family Resemblance” Psalm 73**

I didn't want to become a minister. You see I had seen the best of the church; times when the faith community gathered around my family to support, encourage and pray for us. But I also saw the worst of the church; when people from the congregation said angry, hateful things (from Christians nonetheless) to my Dad that no one should hear. So even with all the loving encouragement of many senior women from churches I had worshipped at over the years and patting my head and saying, “Are you going to be a minister, like your Dad?” I would smile but under my breath whisper, “No way!” Following in my father's footsteps was not a childhood dream of mine. But maybe your life is different. Maybe you ended up in the same profession as your Dad or the same “calling” as your Mom. Many used to do such a thing. I was born, for example, in a farming community where farmers begat farmers, whether you wanted to be or not. Later in my childhood I lived in an area where industry like Stanfields™ employed not just one but often two or three generations and only 30 minutes away the once thriving coal mines once employed generations of coal miners on a regular basis.

You've heard the name “David” mentioned more than a few times during our Psummer Pseries on the Psalms and rightfully so because David, traditionally, has been considered the author of many of the Psalms. So it might not surprise you that David's son, Solomon, was known to write a few Psalms himself – like Father like Son and Psalm 73 may just be one them. Now, if you know anything about David's family life you would know growing up as the King's son (or any King's son or daughter for that matter) would have both advantages and disadvantages. So I'm sure Solomon had more opportunities than most because of his family name. But how does one discern “true” friendships when you are always wondering if this person would be a friend if I wasn't the King's son? And then there is challenge of having David's DNA pulsing through your veins. Sure David was known for some pretty remarkable things that would make any child proud but there were also more than a few characteristics that would bring shame to that same child. Although Scripture calls David, “A man after God's own heart” such was not always the case. David was a man of great faith but also a man of great failure. And sad to say young Solomon lived with some of those mistakes (in the eyes of the world) and sins (in the eyes of God). Maybe you can say the same of your own childhood – an abusive, drunken, promiscuous father may have been your reality too. So I imagine Solomon growing up probably said something like, “I will never be anything like my father.” Like father, like son.

Solomon's own “David and Goliath story” can be found in 1 Kings 3:13-28. Two women came to Solomon claiming to be the mother of a child. How would Solomon figure it out without Maury Povich around to help with the paternity test? So Solomon used the “gift” he had asked God for, the

gift of wisdom, and posed a resolution that only the true mother would answer correctly which was choosing not to have her child over the child's death. Well done Solomon. Like father, like son. But then there were other aspects of Solomon's life, darker parts of his life that mirrored his father. Like father, like son. Just as David, as you know, had trouble living in a monogamous relationship and so did Solomon – times 100. Like father, like son. But also like father, like son, Solomon wrote, he composed beautiful prose and poetry that spoke of his successes and his failures. Like father, like son. Psalm 73 may be one of those writings. Walter Bruggemann suggests there is nothing wrong in trying to imagine who is writing any one of the Psalms and even imagining Solomon as the author of Psalm 73 because in many ways Psalm 73 mimics Solomon's life and the lessons he learned about following "in his father's footsteps".

It might be helpful then as we look briefly at this Psalm to divide it into 4 unequal parts so we can see the 4 stages of Solomon's life and that I hope might resonate with you. For like Solomon many of us here grew up with family rules, whether "The Golden Rule" or "WWJD" (what would Jesus do). Although parents may not have said such a thing out loud what most parents meant in our early years was "Do what I say not what I do." And David, I believe was no exception. So it should not surprise us that a good Jewish boy like Solomon was taught to follow Torah – in other words, the rules of Holy Scripture (or the Old Testament for Jews). And if you do this (follow the Torah) good things will happen to you. And that's really the first movement in Psalm 73 which is how our Psalm begins and is only a verse long. Within our reformed tradition verse 1 of Psalm 73 is "Covenantal Theology" theology at its best which is basically an understanding that God works in cause and effect. Do this... and this will happen. Do that... and that will happen or as Psalm 73 begins, Be "good hearted" and God will be good to you. Chances are this is beginning to sound familiar to you and taking you back to your own childhood.

Sounds like a sure thing, don't you agree? But Solomon "nearly missed it," as he begins the second movement (verses 2-16) "(Solomon) nearly missed it" (73:2) because he was "looking the other way." (73:3) In fact this is the first use of parallelism (or repetition of similar thought in a slightly different way) in our Psalm, which is a common poetic tool in many of the Psalms including Psalm 73. In verses 2-16 Solomon nearly missed being a Torah follower because things didn't pan out the way he thought they would. Do good and God will be good to you (or the parallel) do bad and God will do bad to you wasn't always "true". As Solomon looked around, even at his own life, he noticed that doing good didn't always result in good back and doing bad sometimes had good results, at a glance. "Wicked people", for example have (apparently) made it. (73:4) They seem to have everything they want "without a care in the world" even though they are wicked. (73:5) At least this is what Solomon

saw. These “bad people” have “nice clothes” (73:6) and “eat whatever they want.” (73:7) They’re loud and obnoxious people and have people who listen to them. (73:10) I mean some of them are on reality shows and in the newspapers and tabloids for not so good things. In fact one even made it to the most powerful position in the world. And what have I been doing? I’ve been wasting my time following “stupid rules!” (73:13) thinks Solomon. Maybe you’ve said the same thing. Maybe you are thinking the same thing – even now. Why do I still believe? Is it worth it? Am I that gullible? Why not just join those who have no faith and do “bad things” because it seems to me that God blesses them too, sometimes even more than I am blessed. So it’s no surprise that Solomon gets a “headache” over this whole thing. (73:16)

But then something happens to change Solomon’s mind and could maybe even change your mind as well, when you think like this. In only one simply verse (or movement 3) something transformative occurs. The Psalmist introduces it with the word “until” and then everything changes. (73:17) What happens? Well the Psalmist goes to... church. Did you notice that? In verse 17 the Psalmist goes to “sanctuary” (or Temple) or for you and me (church). In fact I find it interesting that in the original text it is not simply “sanctuary” but sanctuaries (plural). Which could mean many churches or I would like translate as going back to church many times. Now we have no idea what happened to the Psalmist at church. Maybe he heard the Torah read again like he did when he was a child. Maybe he had a God-encounter in church where he actually saw or heard from God visually and/or audibly or maybe it parallels another story that you might know in the New Testament about a wayward son who made his way back “home” after he came to his “senses.” (Story of the Prodigal Son) We may not know exactly what happened at church with Solomon but we do know he seems to have figured things out. Although it may “appear” these ungodly people are being blessed they have no “staying power”. In other words they will soon be forgotten, even by their own family. I want my children to remember me, says the Psalmist (in a good way). And then something happens that can only be explained by those of us who have had such an experience and I pray we all will have it one day. The Psalmist feels the hand of God holding his. (73:23) Walter Bruggemann tells the story of a Lutheran Priest who led a young girl from one war-torn country in Africa to a safer African country some 300 miles away. They walked for over 300 miles and all the while holding one another’s hand. When they safely arrived at their destination the Priest let go of the young girl’s hand but they had been holding on so tight for so long that both hands were bleeding. It’s a wonderful analogy of the blood soaked hands of Jesus reaching out to us to hold our hands, especially when we are close to giving up everything – including Jesus. All of this gives the Psalmist a change of “heart” which appears (the word heart) no less than 5 times in our Psalm.

It is here and in the last movement (verses 18-28) that the transformation of the Psalmist is complete. He is back to where it all began – a Torah follower. All those “things” (and Solomon had many “things”) that he and others were gathering never seemed to be enough or fulfilling. And it’s still as true today as it was then. One marketer has said that all commercials attempt to tell us what we need and how it will make us happier but even more how stupid we are for not having it, yet. So like Solomon we pursue “commodity” (accumulating) at any cost rather than pursuing “community” (Going to church). We gather things around us things that we believe will make us happy but they never really do. If such was the case why would so many wealthy people I know (and you know) be so miserable? If commodities brought happiness then all wealthy people would be happy – so much happier than you and I who have far less. Instead the Psalmist recaptures joy and peace within community – community with God and community with God’s people at church.

Luke tells the story of Jesus encountering a person the Bible simply calls a “Fool.” (Luke 12:13ff) It’s basically the story of someone buying into this commodity based philosophy of needing more and more “stuff” rather than needing more of God. The fool runs out of storage so he builds bigger barns so he can “relax, drink and be merry” - which just happened to be the bumper sticker on his wagon. Jesus says, “He was rich to self but poor to God”. But in the end it only cause the fool to worry even more. Jesus tells the disciples this parable so they too will not worry – like the birds, who aren’t wealthy but have all they need. Or “consider the lilies of the field how they grow, they neither toil nor spin yet I tell not even ..... (Solomon) in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.” (Luke 12:27)

It’s like Jesus, a good Torah following Jew, remembered his own father reading the Psalms to him at bedtime, maybe even Psalm 73. Yes, Jesus followed in the footsteps of his earthly father taking up the carpentry trade like maybe his father had done before him. Like father, like son. But Jesus also followed in the step of his heavenly Father faithfully following, submitting his life to the Father’s will, even giving up many of the so-called treasures of this world for the community and intimacy of the Father. Like Father, like Son. Let us pray....

(I am indebted to Walter Brueggemann for many of his insights from Psalm 73)