

It is one of my favorite verses in all of Scripture, a portion of which you will find on the front cover of your bulletin this morning, from today's Psalm: "God's wrath is short; God's favor lasts a lifetime. Weeping spends the night, but joy comes in the morning. "It's beautiful, yet complex. Filled with hope, yet brutally honest. After all, one of the easiest targets for us younger preachers is to rail against the clergy from generations ago: the ones who obsessed over God's wrath from the pulpit, unleashing intimidation and instilling feelings of guilt, to ensure people kept coming back to worship. For if they did not participate in the life of the church, they must be fearful of the wrath of God that could doom them for all eternity. We wonder if we are still dealing with the long-term repercussions of such fire and brimstone sermons, making people to never dare test out the inside of sanctuary ever again. And yet, there is a part of me that appreciates God having that wrathful part.

I remember the first mass-scale atrocity in the U.S. for my lifetime, at least. I was in the 5th grade, and my classmates and I were standing on the first floor, right outside the lunchroom. All of a sudden, someone from the office came up to our teacher and told her about a bombing in Oklahoma City. Us children had no idea what was going on, then. We didn't know the ramifications of it all. We couldn't grasp the full gravity of nearly 200 people dying on April 19, 1995. Some of them were parents of elementary age children like us. Some of them were older siblings. Some of them were fulfilling the dreams they had since those first of fifth grade years. And it is in those kind of horrifying moments, that I need God to still have a wrathful part; not in the sense of plotting out revenge through a heavenly arsenal, not about ruining the lives of people cared about by the perpetrators. But I do need God to be angry when such madness occurs, even if it is just with one life in comparison to hundreds of thousands.

I need God to care about those people so much, that God cannot help but react with pain and anguish and even fury. I do not want God to be indifferent, as it's just another day in this messed-up human world. I need God to have the same passion for humanity now as Jesus Christ did thousands of years ago. I need God to still have holy tenacity to flip over money-changing tables. I need God to have the same insistence that we care for each other with love and basic human respect, so much so that God will unleash the prophets from thousands of years ago to shout the message of compassion from the mountaintops. So, although we young preachers like to rail on the clergy of generations ago, I still need God to have a bit of wrath to the divine personality.

Nevertheless, I cling so tightly to the words of the Psalm, that "God's wrath is short," because we all need God to not stay there. It turns out anger, by itself, usually does not get us much anywhere. We need hope and grace empowered by a forgiveness that is beyond our human comprehension. With that in mind, since the fateful day that took down the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, one of the organizations that came to life was the Forgiveness Project. "[They]...shares stories from both victims... and perpetrators of crime and conflict who have rebuilt their lives following hurt and trauma... The testimonies [they] collect bear witness to the resilience of the human spirit and act as a powerful antidote to narratives of hate and dehumanization, presenting alternatives to cycles of conflict, violence, crime and injustice."

One of those stories of forgiveness is from a man named Bud Welch, whose 23-year-old daughter, Julie, died in Oklahoma City bombing. To deal with the pain, he turned to alcohol, initially, further tearing his own life apart. Then, as Bud said in his story with the Forgiveness Project, "on a cold day in January 1996, I came to the bomb site – as I did every day – and I looked across the wasteland where the Murrah Building once stood. My head was splitting from drinking the night before and I thought, 'I

have to do something different, because what I'm doing isn't working.' For the next few weeks, I started to reconcile things in my mind, and finally concluded that it was revenge and hat that had killed Julie and 167 others...seeing what [the perpetrators had] done with their vengeance, I knew I had to send mine in a different direction.

So, Bud ended up over a thousand miles away, just outside of Buffalo, New York, as he met Bill Mc Veigh, the father of Tim, one of the men responsible for the bombing. Bill's youngest daughter Julie was also there. After looking at family photos, spending time around the garden, and exchanging a tear her and there, Bud said, "When I got ready to leave, I shook Bill's hand, then extended it to Jennifer, but she just grabbed me and threw her arms around me. She was the same sort of age as Julie...I don't know which one of us started crying first. As I walked away from the house, I realized that until that moment I had walked alone, (but now a tremendous) weight had lifted from my shoulders. "Soon enough, Bud found it is his heart to forgive Bill's son, Tim. It doesn't make any sense whatsoever to me, but grace usually doesn't.

It's not just what we need God's wrath to not last forever. We need for our wrath to not last forever either. We need hope and grace and mind-boggling forgiveness. And not only that, but we need the belief from God, whose favor for us lasts a lifetime and beyond: the belief from God that we can still overcome evil and hatred with goodness and the same love that took on death itself in Jesus Christ. Weeping from pain and anger can spend the night if it wants, but we still need joy to come in the morning. And time and time again, God insists on exactly that; the same joy of Resurrection life that emerged on Easter morning is meant for us all to enjoy each and every day, no matter the circumstances of the day before. So, for the mind-boggling resilience of God's hope in Jesus Christ who empowers us with new life forever, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen.

Source: The Forgiveness Project (<http://www.theforgivenessproject.com/>)