

Living with Loose Ends

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How do we live with life's loose ends? Do you know what I'm talking about? Relationships that have gotten messed up, and you don't know how to make them right again. A failure that haunts you. You want some closure, but closure seems impossible. How do we live with loose ends?

I

The Psalmist knows what we are talking about. John Calvin, the Protestant Reformer, called the Psalms "the anatomy of all parts of the soul." It's all there. We're all there. In Psalm 55 the Psalmist cries out to God for help:

O God, listen to my prayer,
do not hide from my pleading,
attend to me and reply;
with my cares, I cannot rest.¹

Do you identify? "With my cares I cannot rest."¹

The Psalmist first addresses public threats:

I tremble at the shouts of the foe,
at the cries of the wicked;
for they bring down evil upon me.
They assail me with fury.

Somedays the world seems like it is going “to hell in a handbasket”, to use a familiar phrase. The troubles of the world, the success of the wicked seem overwhelming.

Then the psalmist voices what we all wish someday.

O that I had wings like a dove
to fly away and be at rest.
So I would escape far away
and take refuge in the desert.

Have you ever wanted to try on the wings of *that* dove? And escape to a faraway place?

Then, a few verses down in the Psalm, the psalmist describes a very personal hurt, the betrayal of someone intimately close:

If this had been done by an enemy
then I could bear it.

if a rival had risen against me,
then I could hide.

But it is you my own companion,
my intimate friend!...

My companion has turned against me
has broken our pact,
with speech softer than butter,
with a heart set on war,
with words smoother than oil,
though they are naked swords.

The hurt and harm are as deep as it gets. “O that I had wings like a dove to fly away and be at rest.” Indeed.

Now comes the answer to the psalmist’s plea, as if the Spirit had come to comfort and guide, as the Spirit does. And now I use the familiar King James Version:

Cast thy burden upon the Lord,
and he shall sustain thee.

Psalm 55:22. Some of you may have memorized it from long ago, a beloved verse.

I have told you of the tragic automobile accident I had as a college student on the way to preach. I struck a child who jumped in front of my car, ending her life. I received many loving calls and letters of comfort and support. One came from someone in my growing up church who placed at the end of her note a biblical citation, not the verse itself but the citation: Psalm 50:22. Now what she had meant to write down was Psalm 55: 22: “Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he shall sustain thee.” But when I looked up Psalm 50:22, it read:

Now consider this, ye that forget God,
lest I tear you in pieces
and there be none to deliver you!

I pretty soon figured out what had happened—always double check your citations! —and I think the laughter did me more good than the correct verse might have.

But here’s the verse, and its message may be what we most need when we are living with loose ends:

Cast thy burden upon the Lord,
and he shall sustain thee.

Here is what some have called “the prayer of relinquishment”: we offer to God what we cannot manage ourselves. We let go. Sometimes faith means holding on, holding on to what is good and true. But other times faith is letting go, letting go of what is damaging you, no longer bringing life but something closer to death. Anne Lamott has spoken to our human condition as a child of God: “...we are so ruined and so loved, and in charge of so little.”²

The apostle Paul prayed to be delivered of his “thorn in the flesh”, prayed and prayed, but was not delivered. Instead God came to him with these words:

My grace is sufficient for you,
for my strength is made perfect in weakness. (II Corinthians 12:8)

The grace sufficient comes when we suffer life’s trials. As the old hymn goes:

When through fiery trials
thy pathway shall lie,

My grace, all-sufficient,
shall be thy supply.

Shall be thy supply.

II

I heard a speaker recently define religion as “right relation to reality.” The reality that is, not reality as I wish it would be. In an essay on marriage Wendell Berry writes words that can apply to all of life:

Some wishes cannot succeed; some victories cannot be won; some loneliness is incorrigible. But there is relief and freedom in knowing what is real.³

Sometimes we have to live with loose ends, with what is real, and live in hope that someday, if not in this life then in the world to come, things will be mended and made right.

We want closure, but what if closure is not possible? Not now.

Sometimes winning a battle is not worth the cost. Sometimes winning itself is a kind of defeat.

Sometimes winning an argument is just not worth it. We demand to have the last word, but the last word never makes anything better.

Do you want to be right or do you want to be *free*?

I earlier preached a sermon called *Shake the Dust*. Jesus said when people refuse to receive you and reject you, shake the dust off your feet and move on. When you suffer your own failure and defeat, shake the dust off your sandals and move on. The Shaking Off of the Dust is an act of letting go of what you cannot fix, of moving on and offering those who have harmed or rejected you into better hands than yours, God's Hands. It can be a freeing act, and it is an act of trust: We are in good Hands, all of us.

III

So let's consider what it means to live in the good hands of God. Faith at its deepest is not an accumulation of beliefs but trust in the goodness of God, in what Brother David Stendle-Rast calls, "the faithfulness at the heart of things."

We read together in our Call to Gathering two verses that point here. The first was God's word through Jeremiah given to the Hebrew people languishing in Babylonian captivity:

For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not your harm, to give you a future and a hope. (Jeremiah 29:11)

I do not think the plans of God are fixed, but rather are constantly in process moving to the final goal of our well-being and the well-being of the world. A river diverted will still find its way to the sea.

God is not like a Watchmaker in the sky who has designed the world as a time clock, then stepped out of it to watch it run. God is more like a Chess master, who watches all that is happening and makes the right moves to achieve the final victory. God is the Great Improvisor who works with us in all circumstances of life for the good. Which leads to the second verse, Romans 8:28:

We know that in everything, God works for good with those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose.

In *everything*, the good and the bad, the best of times and the worst of times...for our good and for the good of the world.

Corrie Ten Boom who helped many Jews escape the Nazi death camps used this illustration. A woman doing needlework has the beautiful design to her face, but if you turn it around all you see are loose threads. We may not *see* the good God is working out, the good might not appear for a while, but God is at work for the good, your good and the good of the world.

All we might see are the loose threads, not the design in progress. But God is at work for what is good, beautiful and true.

IV

Let's look at the life of Christ who more than anyone I know embodied the goodness, beauty and truth of God. We might have expected the world to follow, and all be well. But he was rejected, executed by the powers-that-be, nailed to a tree to suffer the humiliating death of the cross.

On the night before, he knew what was coming. He prayed to his Abba Father: "All things are possible to thee; remove this cup", his agonized plea. But then came his prayer of relinquishment, the relinquishment of his life into the hands of God: "Not my will, but thine be done." Trusting, trusting in the goodness of God he called *Abba*.

Then, the next day on the cross we hear these final words: "Father, into Thy hands I commit my spirit." The prayer of relinquishment. He was quoting Psalm 31. It is one of the Psalms meant to be read at evening. I have heard that in Jesus' day these words were the bedtime prayer of Hebrew boys and girls.

The cross was not the end of the story of Jesus. On the third day, God raised him from death. The Resurrection was the finish and fulfilment of Jesus' life.

John Ruskin, the famous British art critic of the 19th century, wrote about an artist finishing a painting. He or she does not finish it, not perfectly. The painting is finished by God, in God. "God alone can finish." In the end we do not finish the story of our lives, God does. And God will redeem all our loose ends in the Final Healing in God's good hands. Grace is gathering the loose ends, mending and making things right. We cannot do it on our own. Here grace comes, like the morning light.

The mystic Julian of Norwich was given visions from God, which she called Showings. Perhaps this is her most well-known saying: Sin is part of our human life, but...

All shall be well

and all shall be well,

All manner of thing shall be well.

Later in his life the great preacher Fred Craddock said, "This is what I want most: "To live simply, to love generously, to speak truthfully, and leave the rest to God.""

So, in the meantime of your life, before God finishes your story and gathers up all the loose ends, do your best—the best you can and the best you know—and leave the rest to God.

And when you've *not* done your best? When you are haunted by the past and anxious about the future? The same applies: Do the best you can and the best you know, and leave the rest to God.

1. I am using here the Grail Translation of the Psalms, used in many monasteries as the monks chant the Psalms. (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc. 2000), pp.89-91.

2. From her *Help, Thanks, Wow*.

3. Wendell Berry, "Poetry and Marriage," *Standing By Words* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983), p. 200.