

“Have Regard for This Vine” or “The Gospel According to Ernest and Julio Gallo”

Psalm 80

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“Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven and see; have regard for this vine” is not the prayer that Ernest and Julio Gallo recite every morning as they stroll through their expansive vineyards in the Sonoma Valley of California, although it might not hurt to have some additional crop insurance. Nor is “have regard for this vine” their new advertising campaign aimed at the discriminating wine connoisseur. In fact, the Brothers Gallo do not seem to need much help in that department as the E&J Gallo Winery is, after all, the largest producer of wine in the world, with annual sales exceeding \$1.4 billion and operations in more than 90 countries. Not content with quantity, the Gallo family has begun to pursue quality, and in 1999, at the Los Angeles County Fair’s prestigious Wines of the Americas Competition, the E. & J. Gallo Winery was named “Winery of the Century.” No, I do not own stock in this company, and neither do you because it remains privately held. But the history of the company is pretty interesting in a “rags to riches,” or maybe that should be “screw tops to corks” kind of way, and you should feel free to search them out on the Internet at www.gallo.com for all the details.

But an even more important and compelling history of a vine is found in Psalm 80, the centerpiece of which is this impassioned plea “have regard for this

vine” — this vine, O Lord, which you have nurtured for so long, but now, for some reason, have seen fit to allow to be trampled by swine, plucked by foreigners, and burned to a crisp by enemies. So have regard for this withering vine, O Lord, and restore us by letting your face shine, that we might be saved. Now, as important as the grape was to the economy and the livelihood of that culture, the vine referred to here is not valued for the wine it produces. The vine, of course, is a metaphor for the people of Israel, brought out of slavery from Egypt, given the land of Canaan, allowed to rule the land between the Mediterranean on the west and the river Jordan on the east, and made powerful in the days of kings David and Solomon. But something has gone wrong, the people’s prayers have ceased to be a delight to God’s ears, starvation is imminent, enemies are all around, the Assyrians or the Babylonians have overrun the land, and so a lament goes up from the Psalmist’s lips and all Israel cries out in one voice, cries out in *one* voice in common worship, “Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven and see; have regard for this vine.”

Things are bad, but they are not hopeless. You see, despite the anguish which is evident in the lines of this psalm, — “How long will you be angry, You have fed us with the bread of tears, we are scorned by the nations,” — there is also an unshakeable faith in the power of God to restore Israel: three times in the psalm, the refrain goes up “Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine that we may be saved.” There is no sense in which there is fear that God is not able to

save them, no sense in which they are not worthy of being saved. There is just an unshakeable knowledge that the Lord is our God and we are God's people and it is only a matter of time before our fortunes are restored. We are the chosen people after all. And even though they may say near the end of the psalm, "Give us life, and we will call on your name," they are already doing just that, through their tears and in the midst of trials and tribulations. They are already calling out to the God they know can save them and as they do so, they are both questioning their God and pouring out their souls to God even while they are confident that God will save them. They are neither stoics nor whiners, but they are looking for answers, and this poetry eloquently pleads their case.

But let us take note of what this beautiful poetry offers us as we read it today. It brings to our attention the way in which God is addressed by the people of Israel, the fact that they approached God with questions on their lips and with tears in their eyes. The people of Israel were not worried that God would chastise them for asking questions and they were not worried that God would consider them weak for shedding tears. Besides, how much worse could it get. But even more than that, it was that unshakeable faith and identity as God's chosen people that enabled them to do those two things — to ask why and to weep. God is not afraid of our questions and does not flinch at our tears. It is we who are afraid to ask questions and we who are uncomfortable around tears. The Psalmist speaks

for all Israel and reminds us that it is OK to be angry at God and it is OK to weep before the throne of God.

Sometimes the best way to understand poetry is to use more poetry. In one of those moments of grace in discovery, I happened upon a poem that speaks to Psalm 80 in a profound way. It is written by a fellow named John D. Groppe, and it is called, "My heart is empty."

"My heart is empty," I said to the Lord.
"I have poured out every drop,
And my brother here is dying."
My brother lay stretched on the sand.

"Drink and be refreshed," said the Lord.

"But there is only sand, dry pebbles all around,"
I said and lifted some dusty grains to show him.

"Sing and lift up your heart," said the Lord.

"My throat is parched, my soul dry.
I cannot sing, take us away."

Dance," said the Lord, "and be restored."

"My legs ache and my feet burn.
I can neither stand nor rest."

"Lift up your brother and give him to drink," said the Lord.

My brother's face was on the sand,
his tongue dusty, a crust on his lips.
Lifting his head and holding it to my chest,
"Peace, my brother," I said, "all I have is sand,"
and cried.

Where the tears fell, green shoots appeared
And water bubbled up.

I washed my brother's face,
uncaked his lips and tongue.
He felt his throat clean and clear.
We drank and smelled new flowers
And rejoiced before he slept.
I laid him beside the spring where young palms grew,
And bathed my feet.

There is not a one of us who will go through life and not suffer some kind of hardship. We will be disappointed, we will lose people we love, we will hurt other people, we will see suffering about which we can do nothing. The circumstances in each of our lives will be different, but we cannot change the fact that we will be challenged beyond the limits of our ability to understand, and perhaps even the limits of our ability to endure. And it is here that we learn from the psalmist of the propriety of questions and tears and the power of redemption they hold for us.

To say that questions and tears hold redemptive power is not to say that either the question marks or the tear stains on the pages of our Bibles have, in and of themselves, the power to heal us and save us and make us whole. But it is to say that as gifts of God, they are some of the means by which God tends to us, and sustains us, and helps us to laugh in the midst of tragedy, and makes it so that we can go on praising God's name even in the direst of circumstances. Golda Meir, the former prime minister of Israel, had a sense of the long view of this idea when she said: "Those who don't know how to weep with their whole heart,

don't know how to laugh either." Please do not misunderstand me: it is not our own tears that save us but rather it is God's leading us to question and to weep in which we find healing for our pain and comfort for our anguish. In the midst of our darkest hour of despair, God's grace shows us the way with insistent demands - "drink and be refreshed, sing and lift up your heart, dance and be restored, lift up your brother and give him to drink" - and though we may balk at what seem like absurd requests, when we finally respond to that grace, the thing that we need the most flows in such great abundance that it not only revives us but overwhelms us with blessing. Allow me to give you an example from my own experience.

Many years ago, at an intersection somewhere in Ohio from which a local idiot stole a stopsign, one of my closest friends died as a truck slammed into a van carrying her and nine other students on a science trip. My friend Wendy was about the most harmless individual you could hope to meet. She was a brilliant student, a loyal friend, a teenager who gives teenagers a good name. On the night it happened, I received a call from a classmate I barely knew asking had I heard about Wendy and the others. I was dumbfounded and waited agonizingly for the eleven o'clock news and there was her face on TV. You know that TV is about action and about the only time they show someone in a still photograph on TV is when they are dead. And as her photograph flashed on the screen, the inevitable question formed in my ninth grade mind. Why her? Why wasn't it the young

punks who beat me up in fifth grade. Or the people on my paper route who didn't pay me for weeks at a time. Or my gym teacher, Mr. Price, who liked to paddle people. These were the people I wanted dead, the ones who deserved it. Not the one person who deserved it the least. I'm not sure I had a good idea in ninth grade what the word justice meant, but I knew unfairness when I saw it.

I was certainly not the only one struggling with those questions and certainly not the only one grieving, facts not overlooked by a very wise woman, the art and drama teacher who had been a friend and mentor to Wendy and myself and many others. And so it was she who gathered around her we who questioned and grieved, and for several days we wept and remembered and wondered why and prepared ourselves for a funeral none of us ever thought we could attend. I don't remember talking about things godly, nor about the afterlife, but I remember being there and being with others and I remember crying and asking why. And maybe that is why even today, I remember often my ninth grade friend Wendy Lentz, occasionally visit her gravesite, and am at peace with the way she lived and the way she died. And I have no doubt that the precious days I spent with my schoolmates and a teacher who saw the value of a communal lament, made all the difference in whether I blamed God or came to terms with what each of us will face at some point in our lives.

You may have recognized by now what I experienced in those days, though I would have been unable to label it, namely catharsis. Our English word catharsis

comes from the Greek word *catharsis* which means “a cleansing” or “a purging,” and in fact, *catharsis* is a derivation of *katharos* meaning “pure.” For all its virtues, catharsis has, in this day and age, become something of an overused and misunderstood idea that conjures up pictures of venting to a friend or going on a shopping spree to relieve stress, or whining interminably. But the catharsis which I experienced and to which I think Psalm 80 points us is more than that, with a harder edge than that. This is catharsis in the Greek sense of the word, as in vomiting or evacuating one’s bowels, expelling toxins and bitterness and cleaning out whatever eats you up inside, making pure your innards. This is loud and raucous weeping together in community, shaking a collective angry fist at God, together asking the hard questions of God, and calling out in one, unified voice to the God who made us, to pay attention and come down and save us.

Friends, Psalm 80 is not about wine making nor is it about whining. It is about how we dare to approach God in the midst of tragedies great and small, about doing it together in one voice, about remaining faithful in spite of the pain and hardship which will inevitably come our way. Our crying and lamenting doesn’t change our absolute certainty that God can save. Indeed, our hope is evident in our tears, in our trust of the God who planted us and helped us to grow like a fruitful vine. Like the characters in the Gospels who cry out to Jesus from the side of the road and who are healed, our salvation comes from the faith of our tears, and from crying out to God to hear us. God may answer our questions by

asking us to do things we cannot imagine being able to do, but God's faith in us brings us the salvation we need.

I would like to leave you with this thought, a vision of what a church that takes seriously the power of lament might look like. It is not often that we come together to lament, and when we do, it is usually when a child has died, or a plane has crashed, or our nation is at war, wonderful reasons all to gather and to raise our questions and let fall our tears. But I do not think it is a stretch to say that overall, we are too shy or too private or too full of false humility to share with one another the daily and nagging difficulties in our lives for which we all might gather in cathartic lament. And for the most part, we are reticent to take a stand against what we know is unjust because we risk the ostracism which may come if we call for a lament that raises our questions to God and lets flow our tears in public. If this church, if any church, would claim the unshakeable faith the Psalmist displays in Psalm 80, it would do well to encourage such trust amongst its members and the courage it takes to act upon that trust, that we might, like Israel of old, lament together, and call upon God and say: "have regard for this vine, O Lord, and let your face shine, that we might be saved." May God give us the strength to do this and more. Amen.