

**"It's Not In My Job Description"  
Psalm 131  
Matthew 6:19-34**

The 131st Psalm is not one of the more familiar Psalms, but it has become one of my favorites. It's short enough for us to hear it again. This time from the Good News Bible.

**Lord, I have given up my pride and turned away from my arrogance. I am not concerned with great matters or with subjects too difficult for me. Instead, I am content and at peace. As a child lies quietly in its mother's arms, so my heart is quiet within me. Israel, trust in the Lord now and forever.**

And again, this time as paraphrased by Leslie Brandt.

**O God, I have failed because I expected too much of myself. I have fallen because I focused too much on success and reckoned too little with my own humanity. It is time that I still my restless heart and quiet my overambitious spirit. It is far better that we center our aspirations on God and His will for our lives.<sup>i</sup>**

One more time from *The Message*:

**God, I'm not trying to rule the roost, I don't want to be king of the mountain. I haven't meddled where I have no business or fantasized grandiose plans. I've kept my feet on the ground, I've cultivated a quiet heart. Like a baby content in its mother's arms, my soul is a baby content. Wait, Israel, for God. Wait with hope. Hope now; hope always!**

That's so liberating for the human spirit. It resonates with a poster I used to display in my office: "Do not feel totally, personally, irrevocably responsible for everything. That's my job. Love, God."

In this time of electioneering, I wonder. Wouldn't it be better for everyone if candidates for the Presidency spoke only about why they wanted to serve, saying something of their political philosophy, something of the things they've done in the past and then promised absolutely nothing, except to try to do the best he or she could. It is a much more humble and honest outlook. Elected officials can't always deliver on their pre-election promises, but they can always be true to themselves.

**"I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul..."** That sounds like a contradiction of so much we have been taught to believe. After all, aren't we called to do "great and marvelous things?" Our Lord calls us to "go and make disciples of all nations,"<sup>ii</sup> to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, cloth the naked, visit and care for the sick and those in prison?<sup>iii</sup> The OT prophets call us to work for justice and righteousness.<sup>iv</sup> Isaiah told the people of Israel that it was "too light a thing," it was too insignificant for them to be concerned only about themselves.

God had a greater task for them. God had called them so they would be "a light to the nations--so that all the world may be saved."<sup>v</sup>

We need to keep such challenges before us, but we also need to hear the balance offered by this Psalm. It's so easy to confuse the call to go into the world as God's witnesses with the mistaken notion that we are to somehow sent to save the world. Just because we are called to share God's work of reconciliation<sup>vi</sup> doesn't mean God depends solely on the church to bring about his purpose for the world.

**"I am not concerned with great matters or with subjects too difficult for me."** That's no retreat from our high calling. That's a call to become more focused; to not bite off more than we can chew, and to have a more sober assessment of who we are and who we are not. No one of us is the Messiah, not even all of us together!

James Wall, former editor of *The Christian Century*, once told of a friend "who is tormented by the thought that she does not do enough to solve the problems of environmental destruction and excessive consumerism. As a deeply religious person, she is continually concerned about these issues, but feels she never does enough."<sup>vii</sup>

One of the burdens of taking our faith seriously is the feeling that we haven't done enough. That's the burden with which pastors live. At the end of a week, I seldom feel like I've finished all I have to do, and I'm not sure that it will feel any different when we finally ride off into the sunset, so to speak! That's when I need the 131<sup>st</sup> Psalm and hear of one who did not think too highly of himself<sup>viii</sup> and, therefore, could enjoy the peace and tranquility that comes with trusting God's motherly care. Martin Luther once said, "The 131<sup>st</sup> is one of the shortest of all psalms, but for me, its truth has taken the longest to learn." It takes a long time for many of us.

Our most recent Book Club ended this past Thursday evening. We read "Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope" by Brian McLaren.<sup>ix</sup> The author seeks to apply the core message of Jesus to today's global problems which he groups into four themes or "dysfunctions:"

- Environmental breakdown caused by our unsustainable global economy that fails to respect environmental limits even as it succeeds in producing great wealth for about one-third of the world's population. He called this the *prosperity crisis*.
- The growing gap between the ultra-rich and the extremely poor, which prompts the poor majority to envy, resent, and even hate the rich minority – which in turn elicits fear and anger in the rich. He called this the *equity crisis*.
- The danger of cataclysmic war arising from the intensifying resentment and fear among various groups at opposite ends of the economic spectrum. He called this the *security crisis*.
- The failure of the world's religions, especially its two largest religions, to provide a framing story capable of healing or reducing the three previous crises. He called this the *spirituality crisis*.

After meeting for eight weeks and considering the laundry list of all the world's problems, we all felt more than a little limp. How can we solve these problems? Do we really believe that Jesus offers us a viable, alternate way of living in the world, that is living in God's kingdom?

Is there hope, or is all hopeless?

Susan Jones is a regular visitor among us and participated in our group. The other morning she got up rather early and wrote a brief essay describing how she thought she could be an instrument of hope in a world filled with hopelessness. Her words encouraged the rest of us and put some starch into our languid spirits. A native Virginian, she called her essay:

#### HOPE: SOUTHERN-STYLE

Having worked day after day as a day laborer, Juan was used to the sweat rolling down his back and blinding his eyes. He knew the one midmorning break would only add to his desire for continued cool breaks of refreshment.

However, it was now only 1 hour into the day and the thermometer already read 90 degrees and the humidity level felt to be at least 110 percent. Trying to escape the anticipated heat, Juan had begun his day's work at 7:30 and his routine 10:00 break seemed days away.

Thinking of the work to be completed today, his concentration was broken by the slight tingling of a remembered sound of long ago. Could it really be or was it just a hopeful mirage of a memory?

But, yes, it was for real – the offer of a glass of iced water.

A random act of kindness. Or in the words of a Boy Scout – an unsolicited act of goodness.

This is the way I find myself extending hope to the world – individual by individual.

A card of encouragement when things seem so mundane. A thank you note to someone for a kind glance when in a crowd of unknowns. A jar of homemade soup given in the “hope” that one less meal to prepare when already “under the weather” will make the heart and soul feel another’s warmth.

If, as a small third world country, could it *not* feel good to be offered (with no strings attached) an unwarranted and unsolicited supply of goods – or even better the services of individuals to help in introducing their wonderful “gifts of trade” (i. e. woven baskets, hand-dyed fabric, etc.) to a market for purchase?

What about extending a hand in brokering a measure of justice without the sale of arms and the sealing of a document with the promise of oil or the right of passage to a war-torn area?

All unsolicited. Without the promise (or ulterior motive) of something in return. Just the act of being a concerned citizen of the world and of the kingdom of a higher spirit that loved the world so much and that gave of him/herself in acts of random kindness in times of unexpected circumstances.

It's so easy to be skeptical and conclude that things are so far beyond us that we can't make a difference and so end up doing nothing. There was a man who was throwing, one at a time, starfish that had been washed up on the beach back into the water. When asked what he was doing he said, "It's low tide and all of these starfish have been washed up onto the shore. If I don't throw them back into the sea, they'll die from lack of oxygen." "I understand," said the skeptic, "but there must be thousands of starfish on this beach, and there are hundreds of beaches along this coast. You can't possibly make a difference." The man smiled, bent down and picked up yet another starfish, and as he threw it back into the sea, he replied, "Made a difference to that one!"<sup>x</sup>

**"I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul."** Can't you hear Jesus at this point? **"Do not worry about your life...can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why worry...? Consider the lilies of the field..."** Have you considered any lilies lately? You should. It's good for the soul.

I like the story of the one who bragged, "I only worry about two things--whether I'm sick, or well. If I'm well, I've got nothing to worry about! If I'm sick, I've only got two things to worry about--whether I get better or whether I die. If I get better, I've got nothing to worry about! And, if I die, I've only got two things to worry about--whether I go to Heaven, or whether I go to Hell. If I go to Heaven, I've got nothing to worry about! And, if I go to Hell, I'll be so busy greeting my friends I won't have time to worry! So, why worry?"

Why worry, indeed! **"Do justice, love kindness,"** the prophet said.<sup>xi</sup> Those are great and marvelous pursuits. But the prophet also said, **"walk humbly with your God."** Walk humbly, remembering that it's not in our job description to be God or to be anyone's savior. Our calling is to be faithful, one starfish at a time.

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- i. Psalm 131, paraphrased by Leslie F. Brandt, Psalms/Now.
  - ii. Matthew 28:19
  - iii. Matthew 25:31-46
  - iv. See Amos 5:24
  - v. Isaiah 49:6
  - vi. See "Confession of 1967," Part II, Section A.1
  - vii. April 9, 1997
  - viii. See Romans 12:3
  - ix. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007)
  - x. Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, Chicken Soup for the Soul, (Deerfield Beach, FL, Health Communications, Inc., 1993), p. 22-23.
  - xi. Micah 6:8