
Shake This Tree

Psalm 34

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 26, 2012 by the Dr. Ellen Davis

People come to a place like this because they are looking for something; let's call it "the good life." Of course I don't mean a life of ease. Duke is for the most part a Type-A kind of place; only the truly insane would come here looking to kick back. What I do mean is, people come to a university like this, as a student, a staff or faculty member, a trustee or loyal friend – they come because they are hoping to find here something worth spending themselves on, worth their time and also their heart and mind... something that might be worth years of their life. A great university like this one is, you might say, a place of desire – very often, intense desire.

The church is also a place of desire. People come looking for something *more* in their lives, something more than is on offer in our culture at large, more even than in the university at large. Many of you have come this morning at some inconvenience to yourselves. You could have slept in, or knocked an item or two off your to-do list, but you came, I dare say, hoping to hear something... in the music or the prayers, from the pulpit, in the education hour, maybe from a friend; week after week, we all come here hoping to hear something that will feed us. Sometimes we come out of sheer desperation, hoping against hope that someone will throw out a lifeline to get us through the day, the week, the seemingly endless future. So the church, like the university, is a place of desire – very often, intense desire.

Desire is a good and necessary thing, and probably we do not speak about it nearly enough in the classroom and in the church. We let the advertising industry have the corner on desire, and that's a great shame, because their notion of desire is pretty paltry: the endless, repetitious hunger to buy more of the same stuff. But real desire is a great thing, an essential part of our humanity. As far as we know, this is something distinctively human: the yearning to realize a great dream, the passion for excellence that keeps you up at night, wakes you up in the morning, sets your heart on fire.

Desire is a necessary and good part of our humanity, but there is a catch. There's always a catch to what is good and necessary, isn't there? If there were no catch, there would be no sermons, probably no novels, and not many films either – because the human story is all about where the catch lies. If there were no catch to what is good, there would certainly be no Bible. Because the Bible is all about the desire for what is good, and how that desire so easily gets derailed, squandered, poisoned, so it becomes destructive of what is good in oneself and others. So here's the catch: Because we are human, we do and must desire. And because we are *merely* human, we often desire the wrong thing, or our desire for the best is just lukewarm. Or we desire one good thing... and then another, and another – but we never hold steady, and so nothing good comes of our aimless desiring.

The psalmist we heard today brings us directly into this drama of desire and unfocused desire and poisoned desire. Listen again:

Whoever is the person who desires life,
who loves the time to see what is good... (v. 13)

... if you are that kind of person, the psalmist says, then come on over here; let's talk.

Our psalmist was a teacher in ancient Israel, well over 2,500 years ago – a teacher of young, talented, educationally privileged people, maybe even associated with the royal court (cf. v. 1). I'm making all this up, of course; the psalm doesn't actually tell who wrote it, when, and precisely for whom. But biblical scholars make stuff up all the time, although we don't call it that. Rather, we say we are "offering a

plausible historical reconstruction, based on the evidence available.” That’s what I’m doing, and here is my major piece of evidence: Our psalm is an acrostic, an alphabetic poem. That’s not obvious in English, but in Hebrew you can see that it has one verse for each letter of the alphabet, in order. The first verse starts with *aleph* (A), the second one *bet* (B), and so on, all the way through the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Alphabetic acrostics are exactly the kind of thing that ancient teachers used as school lessons, so their students could memorize the lesson and fully internalize it.

Now imagine with me that we are listening to our teacher, in an institution not unlike this one: a school for very smart people who have made it through a rigorous selection process, people who have some kind of fire lit under them; they “desire life.” It might well be a school at the temple in Jerusalem, and if so, then these students attended worship or got some of their religious education in an upscale stone building not unlike this one, though smaller. But this will do nicely for the exercise of our historical imagination. So let’s imagine ourselves into their sandals, with our teacher the psalmist giving us these “awesome” sound-bites to chew on – 22 of them in all, each verse a chewable piece of wisdom. Let’s call them wisdom-bites.

This teacher of ours has several of the best lines in the whole Bible, including this one:

Taste and see – taste and see that the LORD is good. (v. 9)

It’s a mind-bending idea, when you stop and think about it: the idea that the God who made earth and heaven comes so close to us that you can taste it. You might say that the whole gospel of Jesus Christ unfolds from this one line. Everything from Incarnation to Eucharist/Holy Communion – everything is anticipated here: “Taste and see that the LORD is good.”

Now let’s put that line in context, in our imagined scenario. This teacher is talking to people just starting out on the grand tour of life, looking for something worth spending themselves on; they’re so eager for a meaningful life, they can taste it. To them...us... the teacher says, “If you want something worthwhile, then come on over here and shake this tree. It’s the tree of life. Taste the fruit that falls into your hand, and you’ll find that it satisfies. God refreshes and satisfies the hungry. So come on over here and shake this tree. ‘Taste and see that the LORD is good.’ Just chew on that for a while.”

And now, a few wisdom-bites later, the teacher says a second mind-bending thing. I quote:

Come on, kids, listen to me; I’ll teach you... the fear of the LORD. (v. 12)

“Fear of the LORD” – this is a phrase church-folks no longer use much, probably because it lacks curb appeal in our culture. But Jesus and a lot of other people in the Bible speak often of fearing God; it is the standard biblical term for what we might call “true faith” – or even, “good sense.” Our psalmist-teacher puts “fear of the LORD” front and center, and the reason for that is simple: Fear is a huge part of our lives, for good and for ill. Healthy fear motivates us and keeps us moving in the right direction; unhealthy fear paralyzes us, or else it distorts our desires, so we do damage to ourselves and others. Fear of the LORD is the starting place for spiritual health and therefore, for a life that is worthwhile.

“Tell me what you’re afraid of,” this wise teacher might say, “and I’ll tell you the quality of your life.” Here are some common options: *fear of failure* – that’s prevalent enough. Not just of abject failure, washing out; even more common is the nagging fear of not being *as* good as someone else down the hallway – good but not quite good enough to come out on the very top. That’s a big fear in a place like this. Or the *fear of being alone* – who isn’t afraid of that? *Of being rejected*, judged to be uncool – young and old, we all feel that one. In the end, we know that Facebook or (for me) “Rate My Professors” will render the Great Judgment on us all. Again, the *fear of never being loved and valued* in the way we long for – by a parent or a friend, a spouse or a child, perhaps by the mentor you have chosen for your life’s model. And then there are those fears that lurk at the back of our minds always, often growing greater as the years go by: *the fear of losing to death* the one who really loves me, *of losing my own powers* of mind and body. Maybe all

our fears come down to this one core fear: that I might give myself totally, to some dream, some person – I might invest everything I’ve got, my “one wild and precious life,” as the poet Mary Oliver puts it (“The Summer Day”)... just to have my heart broken in the end.

Our teacher knows everything we are afraid of, and knows also that the only effective antidote to the core fear of heartbreak is fear of the LORD. Fear of the LORD is nothing other than the fear of spending your powers, your gifts, your time on what does not bring you closer to God. *That* is a good thing to be afraid of. In the end, maybe it is the only thing worth being afraid of, because being without God is the worst thing that could happen to us in this world.

Fear of the LORD is the answer to our deep fear of heartbreak. But notice, our psalmist never says: “If you are wise and fear the Lord, your heart will never be broken.” To say that would be foolish; it would be a lie. What this good teacher actually says is quite different:

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted;
he delivers those whose spirits are crushed. (v. 19).

This skilled educator speaks frankly about broken hearts, crushed spirits, because the world is a heartbreaking place. Every heart that is not deadened will break, probably more than once. Heartbreak is the cost of being truly alive, which is to say, it is the cost of love, of investing yourself in this heartbreaking world. And so it follows that heartbreak itself is part of the cost of a good education.

On my own first day in a Master’s program, the dean of my seminary said to us: “If you don’t shed some tears here, you will have missed the point.” Maybe it is not sheer coincidence that Dean Borsch is a biblical scholar, for what he and the psalmist and Jesus and all the other voices in the Bible say, what the church proclaims through the gospel, is that heartbreak isn’t something you just go through and get past; it is a lifelong learning program. The promise of God as we hear it in the Bible is not that things will always turn out as you desire, if only you are “on God’s side” – whatever that means. Some irresponsible preachers might tell you that, but don’t listen; it’s nonsense. The promise and assurance of the Gospel is no-nonsense, and at the same time it is boundlessly hopeful. Here is the real deal: When your most cherished hopes are disappointed (and this will happen), when your heart breaks, then God is right there, at your side, close to the brokenhearted. God is especially close to the brokenhearted, because God knows just what it’s like to have your heart broken by the world. God’s heart was broken at the cross of Christ. So God draws close to the brokenhearted, and stays with them. Funny... it seems that God likes the company. The brokenhearted are the kindred souls of God, and we need not fear to be among them.

Now what was it that our psalmist-teacher said a while back?

Whoever is the person who desires life,
who loves the time to see what is good... (v. 13)

... if that person is you, then you have come to the right place. You’ve come to a place where it is safe to invest yourself fully, because God satisfies and sustains through everything. Here, in the place where the gospel of Christ is proclaimed, where we try to live it out, you never have to pretend to yourself or anyone else that you are invulnerable, that your heart can never break.

You have come here, and we are glad that you have come. So be bold. Step up and shake this tree; you’ll discover, it is the tree of life. Taste its fruit; taste and see that the LORD is good. Amen.

Ellen F. Davis