

Psalm 146

Praise be to God! Praise God, O my soul!
The Sovereign will reign forever!
I will praise God as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God all my life long.
Do not put your trust in nobles, in mortals,
in whom there is no help.
When their breath departs, they return to the earth,
on that very day their plans perish.
Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob
, whose hope is in the Sovereign their God, who made heaven
and earth, the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;
Who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.
God sets the prisoners free;
God opens the eyes of those who cannot see.
God lifts up those who are bowed down;
God loves the righteous.
God watches over the strangers and upholds
the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked God brings to ruin.
The Sovereign will reign forever, your God, O Zion,
for all generations.
Praise be to God!

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23

A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,
and favor is better than silver or gold.
The rich and poor have this common:
the Lord is the maker of them all.
Whoever sows injustice will reap calamity,
And the rod of anger will fail.
Those who are generous are blessed,
For they share their bread with the poor.
Do not rob the poor because they are poor,
Or crush the afflicted at the gate;
For the Lord pleads their cause
And despoils of life those who despoil them.

“On Closing the Gap”

The medieval castles along the Rhine River are nothing like Walt Disney’s magical kingdom. These castles housed powerful and wealthy robber barons and their families, not fairy tale princes and princesses. Unlike Robin Hood who stole from the rich and gave to the poor, these rulers robbed from river merchants traveling down the Rhine and kept the wealth for themselves. Robber baron families slept altogether in the safety of a room high up in the castle. Right off those quarters lay a small prayer chapel for family members only, no commoner blood allowed. Below the bedroom was the dining room for the knights. This area was reserved for knights who had sworn first allegiance to their lord. The kitchen below that feasting area housed the servants. Below the kitchen lay the gated entry, vaulted walls, and cannon artillery. Below the entry way was the torture chamber, where the most horrible of inhumane crimes were committed. There, the chill of fear, the dread of pain, and stillness of death hung heavily in the dungeon air. There, surrounded by the body breaking, flesh peeling instruments of pure evil, visual proof of absolute power gone as bad as it can get, sickened the shadowed silence.

Standing there, I felt as though I had just entered the extermination ovens of Hitler’s Nazi regime. Standing there, knee deep in the systemic evil done by the rich and powerful to the poor and vulnerable, it was apparent to me that when the gap between the rich and poor widens, hearts harden, and those deemed of lesser value become disposable commodities-collateral damage-pawns in service of the empire. I assumed that others recognized this too, until I heard a fellow American quip, “And they call our water-boarding bad!”

The age of the robber barons ended when richer and more powerful peoples conquered them. In years that followed, some of the castles fell to ruin, some were bought by rich nationals, some were converted into hotels, and others were preserved as historic tourist sites. Kingdoms rose and fell just like the psalmist sang: ‘Do not put your trust in nobles, in mortals in whom there is no help, When their breath departs, they return to the earth,

and on that very day their plans perish'. Historically, inequalities in top-down social, political, and economic arrangements have resulted in shameful, inhumane treatment to human beings on the bottom. That's the bad news. The good news is that, in every age and culture, religions have cropped up to deal with and to fight against these powers and systems of inequity. In the Old Testament of the Bible we find that in the faith and spiritual practices of Judaism. when Israel found itself suffering at the bottom of the garbage heap, worshipping congregation engaged in public prayers of gratitude and prayer. The table turning difference here, however, was that when they took a knee, they gave homage to YHWH their Creator, Lord, and King instead of giving allegiance to nobles.

The most important thing to note in the liturgy of their prayers in worship of YHWH was that their faith was grounded in the character of YHWH as sung in Psalm 117:2a:

**For great is his steadfast love toward us,
and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever.**

. . . where 'steadfast love' and 'faithfulness' are two synonyms for God's readiness to honor covenantal commitments to Israel and to the world. The second important thing to note about their praying when they found themselves at the bottom of the pyramid of power is that they also believed that YHWH was their merciful God of justice. In his book, 'From Whom No Secrets Are Hid,' Brueggemann explained: 'Along with attestation concerning YHWH's character, many hymns celebrate the marvelous "wonders" of YHWH---wonders committed on some specific occasion and those regularly performed by Israel's Lord. Thus, in Psalm 146:3-9, the capacity of YHWH to enact social transformations is contrasted with the "princes" who have no energy or capacity for such transformations. The vista of YHWH's action is as large as creation itself. But the accent of the psalm is YHWH's commitment to the well being of the socially vulnerable and marginal, which is to say, prisoners, the blind, the bowed down, strangers, orphans, widows, all those who are without conventional social protection. In this characterization of God, the psalm already articulates an ethical

summons to God's followers that they, too, are to be engaged with such vulnerable and marginal persons (p. 2).

On this Labor Sunday, justice ministries in both our UUA and UCC congregations lift up prophetic voices from the underside of power. On this Labor Sunday, we take to heart---'Every Worker deserves a Living Wage' activists. . . .so that all God's people may thrive. We tune our ears to "Black Lives Matter" . . . so that all God's precious children may live. We support Fuller Center Bicyclers who ride from coast to coast building homes along the way. We stand with Walkers Against Fracking so that our children may have an earthly home in which to live. We educate our children with Our Whole Lives curriculum . . .so that they might know their worth in the heart of the Lord as both precious and of equal value in their Maker's eyes.

In his prophetic deeds of healing and table turning actions against the Roman and Jewish authorities of his day, Jesus made it clear that his Abba in heaven stands in solidarity with and empowers the vulnerable on the underside. And so I'll end with the prayer that Brueggemann wrote after reading psalm 146 on the day Milosovich fell in Belgrade. It's entitled: 'You. . . and therefore us'. The day demands that we begin in praise of you, for the day is yours and we are yours, we could not live the day without reference to you, without your gifts, without your commands. We begin with praise, for the gift of life, for the gift of our life together, for the gift of life in your world, with all your beloved creatures, for the gift of life in your church with your church with hour steady recital of wonders. You, you alone, only you, you who made and makes and remakes heaven and earth, you who executes justice and gives food we know not how, you who sets prisoners free and sights the blind, you who lifts up and watches and upholds, you who reigns forever, you . . . and therefore us. You, except we turn to lesser trusts, all of us with our trust in the powers. You, except we turn to ignoble aims, all of us preoccupied with ourselves. You, except we invest in our little controls and our larger fears, all of us marked by anxiety. And then we watch as you ease us out of anxiety, as you heal our selves turned new, as you topple powers and bring new chances for truthful public life. You . . . except . . . but then finally, always, everywhere you . . . and us on the receiving end. And we are grateful. Amen