

Faith Mennonite Church
October 25, 2015
Psalms: Prayers that Jesus Prayed

How do you say love?

Psalm 86:1-2, 5-6; Psalm 103:8-14

A couple weeks ago on NPR's Weekend Edition, Scott Simon interviewed Ryan O'Neal and Ali McGraw, the actors in the 1970 film, *Love Story*. O'Neal and McGraw are currently performing together in a play called *Love Letters*. Whether or not you've seen the movie *Love Story*, you've likely heard the cliched line, "Love means you'll never have to say your sorry." Simon asked whether people come up to them and repeat that phrase. "They do," said Ali McGraw, "and I tell them, respectfully, I have no idea what it means; it's a crock."

The Bible includes many stories and many images of love. It also portrays, more than we would like to admit, times when love is in short supply or down right absent. The Psalms capture both of these realities and because of that, many of the Psalm writers use the language of contrition, regret, disappointment – in effect, saying "I'm sorry" to God.

The Psalms portray God in many different ways with many different names: Ruler, Creator, Judge, Shepherd, Parent, Lover. And when it comes to the kind of love that God bestows, the essence of who God is, the words are robust: steadfast, everlasting, faithful, abounding, compassionate. Words strong enough to accept an "I'm sorry."

Some Christians have sometimes upheld a notion that the God of the Old Testament is a God of violence, wrath, and rules while the God of the New Testament is a God of mercy and love. But all of those descriptions of love—steadfast, everlasting, faithful, abounding, and compassionate—are Old Testament words, words from the heart of the prayers that the Jewish community prayed over centuries. These were the words that shaped Jesus as he was growing up, learning who he was, finding his identity.

The strong descriptions of God's love are all the more significant as the biblical story unfolds in all of its honesty about times when people didn't respond in love either toward God or their neighbors. It's often easier to understand a God of anger than of compassion when we read ancient stories that are not so different from the events unfolding today in places like Syria or Honduras or Nigeria, conflicts that are creating the current refugee crisis, added to the existing reality of millions of displaced people around the world. But even when a Psalm writer laments the darkness in the world, and the fact that on a personal level, others are pursuing or persecuting him, somewhere in the Psalm we find a positive attribute of God, often referring to God's love: "God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (103:8). God the Creator, God the loving parent, is the One in whom people ultimately seek refuge.

The steadfast love of God, this abounding, faithful love, *hesed* in the Hebrew, is a covenant love. God loves, and God wishes for that love to be returned in faithfulness to God and in just relationships within the community. In Psalm 86, the Psalmist expresses loyalty toward God and speaks of being a servant. In Psalm 103 the writer posits this immense love of God as extending to "those who revere God." This is a two-way street. While Jesus taught that God sends rain (an extension of love) on the just and the unjust, in an unconditional way, he also called on his disciples to "love as I have loved you." The best evidence of having truly received and experienced love is to reciprocate and share it around.

One example of this reciprocal, steadfast love that I think about often these days is the love in my family's relationship with our mother. As she increasingly needs more care, which my siblings are providing, she repeatedly tells us how much she appreciates all that we do for her, as if it's something extraordinary or special. And we say, over and over again, "we're only giving back a bit of all the love we've received over our whole lifetime. For our mother has always been an encourager, always a supporter, always one to pray for us and take pride in things we have done. She has demonstrated to us the steadfast love of God.

Another example of steadfast, covenantal love that goes beyond family has been even more powerful for me. As many of you know, Gerald and I lived in Honduras for a year and a half in the mid-

1980s. We lived in a community on the edge of San Pedro Sula, the main industrial city on the north coast of the country. Next to our neighborhood, La Aurora, sat a much poorer community of small, sometimes make-shift homes, known as Chamelecón. I often went there, without fear, and with our then one-year-old Gabriel in tow, to visit families who attended the same church we went to.

In recent years we have been saddened as Honduras has come to be classified as one of the most dangerous countries in the world because of the number of homicides. And this sadness only intensified this summer when the Mennonite Central Committee *Common Place* magazine featured the Chamelecón neighborhood as one now largely controlled by gangs.

But in the midst of the gang violence of Chamelecón sits a Mennonite Church (new since the time we lived there) that has refused to relocate. Some members can no longer attend church because getting there means crossing the territory of opposing gangs. But the church and its pastor, José Fernandez, have felt called to continue demonstrating the faithful love of God in their community. They have held “services in public spaces, prayer campaigns, shared food with the community, and started working with the children of families of gang members.”¹

As a result of their ministry a few former gang members have become active in their church, attracting suspicion from the police. On one occasion when the pastor defended the former gang members accused of a new crime, the police threatened him. But even with these threats Jose and his family have continued to stay and serve. Jose said, “There is a moment where people start to see you as a symbol of God. A lot of people came in the middle of the night to our house asking for prayers. So we as a pastoral family represented sort of a hope that God will do something.” It’s hard to imagine this kind of commitment without an assurance of the steadfast love of God. And it’s hard to imagine any greater witness to this love than what pastor Jose and his members are doing.

While a story like this may move and inspire us, we must remember that the Psalms are not the prayers of extraordinary people. They are prayers that represent and are prayed by the *whole* people of God, the *ordinary* people of God. The Psalms assure us that this steadfast love of God surrounds us when we’re at home making dinner or doing laundry, meeting with a patient or client, cutting hair or editing a document or practicing an instrument, in a classroom teaching or driving passengers from point to point, or building with legos or doing homework. This abounding love is the presence of God and as we acknowledge and name it we will more readily share it and be witnesses of its power.

I believe it was the steadfast love of God that enabled Jesus to face opposition and give his life on the cross. And it was this steadfast love of God that propelled his disciples and later followers such as the apostle Paul to actively witness to God’s love in Christ. Paul spoke often of the importance of faith, but in his letter to the Corinthians, he affirmed that while faith, hope and love are the things that endure, love, God’s steadfast love, is the greatest of these (1 Corinthians 13:13).

¹ Jose Fernandez, as told to Emily Loewen, “First Person: A Mennonite pastor shares about the challenges violence brings to his community and how the congregation is working for a more peaceful future.” *A Common Place*, Mennonite Central Committee, Summer 2015.