

But Who Can Detect Their Errors? - Carl Thomas

July 11, 2010

Psalm 19

Anger turned into destruction over a jury verdict in LA this week. It was anger over an Oakland tragedy that does not admit of satisfactory solution. That's why the anger, the frustration over no discernable justice. Yes, there were the usual outside anarchists taking advantage of the deep, and historical, and pent-up emotion of the genuine. But that doesn't explain away the resentment boiling over into rage when race once again surfaces as the collective term for a history of pain.

A fight had broken out a year and half ago on a BART platform, a fight the details of which have been swallowed up in the reaction that followed and a young black man lay dead there. How did it start? Who is to blame? Why did things escalate? How much of a part did fear for personal safety trump training and good sense? These questions still hang in the air, most probably always will, and in the legal and familial efforts to sort it all out, the sorting, no matter how calm or reasoned it might have been on the part of some, has failed. It was, sadly, predictable.

And God's law about love and relationship between creatures and God and creatures and each other - God's law about care for each other - and our laws, based in good part on what we have tried to learn of God's law -all have been swept aside. Intentional? Inadvertent? Who's to say?

Who can discern their error?

This is the psalmist's question. It's posed rhetorically in this one unit of praise and excitement at the tremendous generosity of God amidst God's display of grandeur.

Who can discern their error? The question does not startle at first. It's possible even not to notice it at all amidst the writer's amazement over creation and admiration of how God has ordered the day-to-day behavior of God's creatures.

And yet, the question stands alone as the one **fearful** reflection amidst phrase after phrase of praise. I like reflection like that. I like it when biblical record brings me up short, forces me to rethink my unexamined living.

The question has an easy answer. No one (just as the Good News Bible translation settles it). No one can tell of their error.

No one, or no ones (plural). We are reminded, if we've forgotten, that human error and vice are not confined to individual transgression. That's what mob psychology is about; that's what national guilt (like Nazi Germany, or Israeli-Palestinian violence is about. That's what race riots are about. That's what witch hunts trade on.

No one.....is the answer. No one.

No one can discern their error - when blinded by frustration, or anger, or fear, or maybe hindsight that refuses guilt even though it haunts him now and will all his life (as must be the situation with the BART officer convicted).

No one can discern their error.....when unable to recognize what everyone *else* sees easily, that what is wrong in your life is that you continue to abuse your body with substances it was not designed to withstand. No one can, when involved blindly in the mistreatment of strangers, or even those in your care, such as some clergy continue to do, taking sexual advantage of the young.

No one can, when taught at a very tender age to follow strong leadership even when that leadership is represented by gang mentality that sees one perspective and one only, a perspective that inevitably leads (if that *is* the correct term) to the early death of so many of our young men, and more recently women, as well).

No one can, when one simply is lost in enjoying one's affluent lifestyle too completely to realize that the lifestyle itself is keeping others in poverty.

No one can, when they are isolated (or isolate themselves) from the effects of their actions.

[Now, we've looked at a lot of negative stuff here; we're dealing with the parts of our lives that we would prefer to ignore. It doesn't feel good, does it? It doesn't to me, either].

Who can discern their errors? Some see a little. But No one sees *all* of their error, often, even protesting innocence.

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This question, dropped in the middle of great joy over God's creation, God's perfect law; this question forces itself on the psalmist with such a strength that he has to pause to consider it even in his enthusiasm. The psalmist surfaces a private worry that should strike the mind of any reader. It's a question that faces squarely the plight of being human in a world totally saturated by God,. And, being human in that kind of world, is a near guarantee of offense against that same, kind and generous and loving, Creator God.

Jeremiah expressed the dilemma a little differently. He posits God correcting the human condition by placing the law of God in the human heart. No longer will they have to learn, he says. They will know, all of them. It will become part of who they are.

There is a desire for a law that is written on our hearts that guides us even when we don't know that we need guidance. What a wonderful prospect. That's what the psalmist might wish for here, too, but he's at a loss to know how to express it perhaps. He's well aware that failure stalks him at every turn, no matter how hard he may try.

He's fully knowledgeable that the perfection of the law that God gives is in harmony with all of what God has created, but that he, as one of God's creatures, is NOT perfect. There is a quiet despair in this otherwise joyous, celebratory psalm. He's asking, in effect, "How can a love so complete be directed at me, when I, among all God's creatures, can know only a small part of my failings, let alone correct any of them, and the results of their being committed will be with me all of my days on earth?"

How indeed? And yet, God does.....does love us in our situation.

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You know, occasionally we need to look at ideas like this in the Bible. Of all of the questions we're going to be examining in this series, this one, this small interjection of a question about the nature of human sin (for that's what we're dealing with here) is the most vexing.

Because.....even after we answer it humbly, as the Good News Translation does for us, as read by Tom earlier, even **then** we still don't know what to do about it. How can we make right the wrongs we don't see, don't understand? Let's look at it in the form of some other questions.

Did you ever come to grips with the failure you refused to recognize when you were young?

Ever take time to reflect on how much you may have abused others you thought you loved?

Ever become overwhelmed by your own separation from God?

Of course you have. Everyone does at one time or another. And then the weight of the notion becomes so great that we try to ignore it, busy ourselves with other things. I used to think I was the only one who did that. Even **that** is an egocentric error, isn't it? But there are other questions too, questions that redirect our attention from our own faults, and fixes our minds back on God.

Have you ever stood in awe that God loves you? Really loves YOU as an individual unique creation who isn't living up to what you've been given.

Ever feel peace in knowing that you don't have to perform well in order to **earn** God's love?

Ever become committed to living the way God wants - knowing that you will probably fail, but firm in the understanding that God wants you to live that way and that you really *must* continue attempting, must try to be a transformational factor in the world?

Ever take Jesus' teachings seriously about the Kingdom of this God being among us, in us, and right here, right now?

Sure you have, some do it most of the time, some a little less often, some rarely, some are afraid to try. But we all know it's there to think about, to decide on, don't we? God has placed in the human heart and mind the desire for good, the exultation of love, and the energy to spend life on improving the lot of others. We worship a God like that. This is a God who forgives us, even the errors we do **not** know (Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do - comes to mind here), this is the issue that particularly worried the psalmist, the one he wants to be delivered from.

And so the psalmist continues after pausing a moment to reflect on his disappointing the God who has given him so much, and who cares for him so greatly, even as this is also the God who is setting up the whole of creation.

Deliver me, Lord, from hidden faults!
Keep me safe, also from willful sins;
don't let them rule over me.
Then I shall be perfect and free from the evil of sin.

May my words and my thoughts be acceptable to you, O Lord, my refuge and my redeemer - a fervent prayer from one man so impressed, so awed, so thankful.

And God offers us, gives us what the psalmist knows he can't achieve, what we can't win for ourselves. Let's call it "***good standing with God,***" the "good standing" that so eluded the psalmist. Others might use terms for it like righteousness (perhaps), or justification, or the result of God's grace, or a number of theological words and phrases that often perplex us. It doesn't matter what you call it.

Approach the idea of becoming close to God again, to get in **good standing** again by any manner that works for you. The bottom line is that God cares for you, cares for me. Will do anything to win us, and never gives up. That's what the whole ministry and meaning of Jesus Christ is about.

A God like that, like the one seen so clearly and devotedly as the psalmist sees and describes here is worthy of some praise now and then.

We would agree, wouldn't we? Amen