

Tracy Daub
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Psalm 14; 2 Samuel 11:1-15

PROPER ALIGNMENT

Psalm 14 matched my mood one of the mornings this week as I finished listening to the news. The stories in the news put me in a dark mood. After hearing about politicians who lie and alter the truth, about policies that will damage the environment, about little children, even babies, separated from their parents at the border, about priests abusing children, about the two year old killed by the mother's boyfriend, about powerful men assaulting women, about a 16 year old killed in a stabbing, about the escalating rhetoric of hostility toward other nations of the world, after reading and hearing about such stories, I felt a certain kinship with the writer of the psalm when that writer states: "The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. They have all gone astray, they are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one."

On such days when I, like this psalmist, feel that there is no one, no, not one, who does good, I realize that the medicine I most need at that time is to intentionally seek examples of goodness and love. I know that God's goodness is out there--in those who show kindness, in the beauty of nature, in the helpfulness of others, in the courage of those who stand up for the vulnerable. Certainly we are made in goodness and love and this beauty can be found in us and around us.

However, the psalmist gives voice to an issue that is real, that we sometimes face in our lives and in our world and that is the universality of evil. This is the issue that the Apostle Paul refers to when he states in his letter to the Romans that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." It is the realization that darkness resides in all humans. And some days, some

days in our lives and in our world, this truth is more glaring than others. Perhaps the writer of Psalm 14 had had such a day when he or she wrote this psalm--a day when the darkness of humanity was particularly conspicuous, when he or she witnessed corrupt people doing abominable deeds.

The people that the psalmist is particularly focused on as corrupt and doing abominable deeds are those who, according to the writer, "say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'" Those who say in their hearts, there is no God. In other words, the writer focuses on atheism.

Now, the kind of atheism Psalm 14 speaks about is not the kind of atheism we are familiar with today. In today's world, atheism is the belief that there is no God at all. But this kind of modern day understanding of atheism was foreign in biblical times. Very few people in biblical times questioned the existence of a divine being. Psalm 14 is not concerned with the kind of atheism we know today in which the existence of God is denied. Instead, the writer is concerned with a kind of atheism that is all too often lodged in the hearts and minds of good religious people as well as in those who consider themselves secular. It's a kind of practical atheism.

The writer of Psalm 14 was concerned with a kind of atheism in which people live and act *as if* there is no God. They don't really need God in any practical way. God does not figure in their daily lives, their decisions, their thoughts. While these folks may believe in the *existence* of God, may even go to church, God is not *essential* in their daily functioning.

Practical atheism often surfaces when people are economically comfortable, when they live relatively secure and safe lives, where they are part of the dominate group. When there is money in the bank, when you wake up expecting life to treat you well, when the status quo benefits you, practical atheism can follow. The need for God can seem less urgent or essential.

Practical atheism takes a particularly harmful turn when it is lived out as moral autonomy. Moral autonomy means you feel free to pretty much do as you wish. You can oppress, abuse, exploit, or nullify other people as you wish. And this is the angle that the writer of Psalm 14 is especially concerned with. Those who say in their hearts, "there is no God," feel free to behave toward others as they like. They are corrupt, and they do what the writer calls "abominable deeds." And their abusive, oppressive, exploitive practices and policies devour the vulnerable and the poor like they would a loaf of bread. They can behave as they like because they believe, in their hearts, there is no larger authority or reference to whom they are accountable.

This is indeed what we see happening with King David. David is a man who does indeed believe in God. But then we see how he behaves, how he acts as if there were no limits, no boundaries to his behavior. And so he sees Bathsheba. And he takes Bathsheba. And he arranges the death of her husband Uriah. And he does this because he believes in his moral autonomy to do so. And others pay the price for such autonomy: the vulnerable Bathsheba who had no choice but to let the king rape her, and her husband Uriah, who had no choice but to follow his king's orders.

History is full of examples of those who act with moral autonomy. The #METOO movement has brought to our attention similar behavior by powerful men today who still act with moral autonomy toward women and some men who are vulnerable to their power and position. They see. They take.

What better example of gross moral autonomy is there than the enslavement of millions of men, women, and children in our country's history by so-called Christian people who took and used and devoured those less powerful for personal gain.

And the separation of thousands of migrant children from their parents at our borders with no thought of a careful plan for reuniting them is a present reminder of how vulnerable people suffer when those in power act without parameters to their power. Some immigration experts predict that many of these children may never be united with their parents. There is no other way to describe what our nation has done to these children and their parents than to use the psalmist's own words: abominable deeds.

But as overwhelmed as we may be by the evil of the world, the psalmist reminds us that this is not where the story ends. For there is a Great Advocate who accompanies the poor and vulnerable of the world. The writer of Psalm 14 reminds us that God sides with the world's weakest and disadvantaged people. Only foolish people imagine that the poor are alone and defenseless. How foolish David was when he imagined that Bathsheba and Uriah were alone. They weren't alone. The psalm offers a "countertheme. This is still God's world." * Fools think they are autonomous. But the wise understand that God is sovereign. And as the biblical witness reveals here in this psalm and throughout the scriptures, God is on the side of the poor and vulnerable. The wise not only understand that there is a God, but understand the special nature of our God--that we worship a God who stands with those who are oppressed. And we would do well to ask ourselves: where do we stand?

Psalm 14 is a lament about a world out of alignment. The writer looks at our world and the behaviors of its people and sees the injury that results when people are out of alignment with the way of God: the way of justice and compassion. Practical atheism results in real injury. When we do not live in alignment with our God and God's ways of justice and compassion, when we answer only to ourselves and our own agendas, there is real harm.

To say, "there is no one who does good, no, not one," is no doubt an exaggeration born out of disgust and frustration. There are people who do good. But there is an inclination within us as individuals and within our society to veer away from the way of God, to live according to our own agendas, to live as those who are autonomous, to in effect, live as those who deny God.

Real belief in God, deep genuine belief in God, lies not only in our words, but in our actions. Real belief lies in aligning our lives to the Creator and to God's ways. Real belief lies in knowing that God is never indifferent to human suffering. And to live otherwise is simply foolish.