

Grateful Living: Seeing with Soft Eyes
Sermon 203 | Greystone Baptist Church | November 12, 2023
Psalm 95: 1-7

Has anyone here ever studied Aikido? I don't know much about it; I've never practiced any of the martial arts. For those who do not know, Aikido is a Japanese martial art that teaches skills for self-defense and fighting an opponent. But it is also (and perhaps more so) about training the state of mind and physical condition.

In fact, in traditional Aikido practice, one progresses through the ranks not by "besting an opponent but through demonstrating understanding of basic exercises and techniques, which become more demanding or difficult as rank increases."¹

Within the practice, there are important skills that a student must learn to embody. These basic frameworks form and shape the disposition of the student so that they begin to embody them not only on the mat, but also in their daily living.

One of the core principles for students of Aikido is called "soft eyes." Having "soft eyes" means to be able to widen one's periphery to take in more of the world."² In terms of practicing the martial arts, it makes perfect sense that one would greatly benefit from an expanded periphery. Think about the advantage one might gain from a wider range of vision! In terms of self defense, if something happens and a stimulus is introduced to an unprepared person, someone with a small range of view, the intrusion signals a fight or flight response. But, for someone who has a wide range - better yet a wide range with soft edges, one that is conditioned to constantly widen, move, expand - the natural response to a stimulus doesn't feel like intrusion at all, rather it triggers a trained response instead of a stressed reaction.³

Applying this Aikido principle to the spiritual life, popular Christian author Parker Palmer says that in these measured responses, when we accept stimuli (the things that interrupt and intrude into our lives) when we accept them with spiritual *soft eyes*, we can begin to think new thoughts. "Soft eyes," he writes, "is an evocative image for what happens when we gaze on sacred reality. Now our eyes are open and receptive, able to take in the greatness of the world and the great grace of things."⁴

¹ <https://aaa-aikido.com/about-aikido/>

² Diana Butler Bass. *Grateful*, p.65.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), p. 113.

I don't know about you, but sometimes I really struggle with "soft eyes." Sometimes when the bad news seems to pile up... When the plans I'd been looking forward to have to change at the last minute... When people I love get a diagnosis we prayed would never come... When none of our interventions seem to be helping and the hits just keep on coming... that is when I struggle with soft eyes and wide vision, and I find myself wanting to narrow my range of sight, because it hurts too much to hold the grief of everything out there. I wonder if you do that too?

But as Parker Palmer reminds us, when we close ourselves off, when we see the world through our own narrow, hard eyes, we don't only miss the hard things, we also rob ourselves of "the greatness of the world and the great grace of things."

We are not the first in history to find ourselves overwhelmed with devastating circumstances. We are not the first to awaken to news about war and unimaginable violence. We are not the first to struggle to move the arc of the moral universe more toward justice. We are not the first to deal with large scale problems even though our small scale, personal struggles are more than enough to weigh us down. We are not the first... and we will not be the last.

In fact, this desperate and depressing situation IS quite simply put, the human condition.

It is for this reason that the question of *theodicy* dominates much of Christian tradition. People of deep faith and moral conviction have (for millennia) asked: *If God is indeed good... Why is there such suffering? How does such evil exist in our world? Why doesn't God do anything about it?*

Well, we might add our voices to the chorus of answers, offering anecdotes and attempts to satisfy that curiosity but the truth is that even the brightest theologians and the most faithful disciples still come up short where suffering and goodness is concerned.

So we will leave that question on the table for now, and rather than seeking a definitive answer to it, perhaps we might search our tradition and our scriptures for a tool to navigate life *given* the reality of evil and suffering in our lives.

The book of Psalms offers us unique insight into the devotional life of early Christians and Jews in the ancient world. Even Jesus quotes from the Psalms in critical moments of his life. Remember his words from the cross: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* Those were not his original words, rather Jesus was reciting an ancient prayer, straight out of Psalm 22.

In a profoundly vulnerable position, Jesus reached deep into his own religious tradition, to find words to describe his experience. Jesus wasn't the first, nor would he be the last, to use the Psalms in such a way. In fact, the Psalms are - more than any other book in our Bibles - a living record of ancient liturgy.

I have told you before that a beloved professor of mine started a class on the Psalms by saying to the students: "if most of the Bible is God's word to us, the Psalms are our words to God." Recitation of the psalms is a popular practice for modern Christians. In our lectionary (a shared schedule of readings that is used for worship planning in most Christian denominations), there is at least one Psalm assigned to every Sunday... sometimes there are two!

In some Christian traditions, the psalms are read in every worship service, as a companion and supplement to the reading from the Gospels, the New Testament, or the Old Testament. The Psalms inspired numerous hymns, they are the foundation of most prayers and liturgies and they are the most popular source of comfort in the wake of death - hello Psalm 23. We do not know who wrote most of them, even though the acclaimed King David is given credit for the majority. We do not even know if they are the handiwork of one prolific author or if they are the result of a community of worshippers who drafted, voiced, and edited the verses until they appeared in today's form. However, what we do know is that the collection of these ancient hymns, poems and prayers provides us with a window through which we might see a glimpse of the worship life of Jews and Christians living in the ancient world.

Here's another fun fact. Although biblical scholars have made numerous attempts to date the psalms, there is yet to be consensus because there are so few specific historical references, so we are left with noting linguistic trends in the reading of the ancient Hebrew. Another way of looking at this difficulty though, is to acknowledge the timelessness of these poetic prayers. *Maybe it is a good thing* that they do not confine themselves to a specific moment in history, or a specific community, or even a specific author, because now, as we read the words, we are free to join our voices and our stories and our experiences with those written so long ago.

You see, the Psalms, in many ways, invite us to widen our view (in a certain sense) and to allow our devotional lives to be shaped and formed by the words of our forefathers and foremothers. Let's take today's Psalm for example: Psalm 95. It is a call to worship. One that reminds us of God's provision for and care of God's people throughout history. Here, the psalmist stretches us to remember that the whole earth from the greatest depth to the highest of mountains, from the seas to the dry land, was all crafted by God's unmatched creativity.

Here, the author beckons us to expand our memory of God's participation in this world, to remember that God's interventions happen outside of our own small slice of history because God operates (to borrow the Aikido term) with soft eyes and an ever-expanding view. Often, we just can't see it. So we have to spend our time cultivating wider and wider peripheries. We have to dedicate ourselves to the spiritual work of softening the edges of our eyes so that we might also begin "to take in the greatness of the world and grace of great things."

Diana Butler Bass says that this (Palmer quote) is another definition of gratitude: to take in the greatness of the world and the great grace of things. And one of the ways we can do this is by grounding ourselves in the ancient liturgies found in the Psalms... words that remind us of God's presence, God's care, and God's provision which predates not only our current circumstance, but also our very existence.

You see, even though we cannot explain *why* things are the way they are, with evil, injustice, and suffering. We can choose ground ourselves in gratitude as we remember God's presence in the midst of it. ...Not only in our particular lives or our unique circumstances, but in EVERY life, in EVERY place, and in EVERY time - God was and God is: with us. In this sense, gratitude is very possible even when we don't *feel* like we have anything to be thankful for; because, gratitude is more than our emotional response to the good things life throws our way. "Even in the darkest times of life, gratitude waits to be seen, recognized, and acted upon more thoughtfully and with a sense of purpose.

Gratitude is a habit of awareness that reshapes our [understanding] and the moral choices we make in the world... Gratitude is an ethic, a coherent set of principles and practices related to grace, gifts, and giving..."⁵ Gratitude, rooted in the ancient words of scripture and repeated with our lips and understood through *soft and ever-softening eyes*, Gratitude can guide our lives as noun, verb, and ethic. And when we allow gratitude to become our ethic, we can see God's *gifts of grace* more fully... which means, we can share them more effectively with our neighbors this world.

Can you imagine a better Christian witness than that? A bunch of people who are agents of God's grace, no matter the circumstance? GRACE! not condemnation or judgment or exclusion or pretension... just grace. Can you imagine a better summary and testimony of the Gospel?

When we allow gratitude to become our ethic, our eyes soften, the edges of our view expands, and we can see God's *gifts of grace* more fully than ever before. The challenge and the invitation for us today is whether or not we are ready to do it - to soften our eyes and to allow the *grace of God* as gift for us (!!) to expand our view?

I want to leave you with some wise words from a more modern poet who adds her voice to the gratitude chorus. Listen now to the words of Maya Angelou and let them pour over you like another gift of grace and an invitation to grateful living. She says:

*If you must look back, do so forgivingly.
If you must look forward, do so prayerfully. However, the wisest thing you can do
is be present in the present... gratefully.*⁶

⁵ Diana Butler Bass. *Grateful*. p. 59.

⁶ Maya Angelou quoted in Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful*. p. 67.