



March 15, 2015

Larry DeLong

Out of the Depths – Psalm 130

I used to make lots of breads and pizza crust. My family wishes I still did. It's a great way to use your hands, and the results are so good!

Assuming, of course, that you do things correctly. If you've ever messed up making dough, whether fancy bread or Bisquick biscuits on a camping trip, you know what it is to bite into a nice, dry lump of flour that wasn't completely mixed.

Forgiveness has lots of dry, hard lumps in it.

One of the many hard lumps in the forgiveness dough: You may forgive me, but that doesn't mean that I will forgive.

Forgiveness is a two-way street, but too often one of the lanes is blocked.

Now, our ability to forgive makes a real difference in the state of our souls. It's a gift of God. When one person forgives another, it makes God smile; when they forgive *each* other, God laughs in joy. So, even if only one party to injury forgives, it's a good and spiritual thing.

It's healthy, it's healing, it's a taste of the bread of heaven without any lumps.

What happens, though, when it's God who needs forgiveness?

There's a pair of movies made forty-some years ago, starring Liv Ullman and Max von Sydow, sometimes called together *The Emigrant Saga*. A couple, leaves Sweden sometime in the early 19th century, after their son dies from eating food that wasn't yet ready to eat. They end up in Minnesota, a hard life on both ends. The wife, Kristina, after bearing many children and having many miscarriages, dies in childbirth, which is what they'd been told would happen if she became pregnant again, but their love could not keep them apart. Naturally, husband Karl-Oskar blames himself, but not too surprisingly, he blames God as well. And not just for Kristina's death, but for all they and he have experienced. He deliberately turns his back on God, and never turns back.

How do you forgive God? That's the struggle of humankind, the problem of evil, the fly in the ointment of Divine Providence. A really big flour-ball in the dough of life. Karl-Oskar couldn't forgive God, couldn't get past his anger at the tragedy of his life, and the rage and bitterness never stop growing, poisoning his spirit as surely as the food that poisoned his son.

We're dealing with a huge issue here, and I won't pretend that we can get through it in one sermon or a snappy cliché; nor do I *want* to

take away the difficulties. The pain is too strong, too real, too much a part of our spiritual growth: it must be acknowledged and respected.

What I do want to explore is a simple truth, though it's simple only in that it's easy to say. It's much harder to integrate into our hearts: *to forgive God, we first have to seek God's forgiveness*. Psalm 130 teaches us how necessary this is, especially when we're overwhelmed by awful things.

“I cry to you from the depths, Lord – my Lord, listen to my voice!”

My depths have not been particularly deep, but I have cried from them – and perhaps you have, too, from your own private depths.

It is a part of the human condition – rich, poor, healthy, sick, comfortable, troubled – that sooner or later, we will find some place where we cannot stand firm, where we cannot find a footing. That's the scary part of “the depths,” after all – when you're in them, you can't find a place to plant your feet. You are “out of your depth,” “adrift.”

Think of a child, first time in deep water, unable to put down a foot and feel grounded – literally. For all but the most exceptional, that is a scary place to be, even with a parent holding on.

And in the years since you and I first ended up over our heads in a stream or a lake or the ocean or a pool, we've experienced being in over our heads in the seas of life, haven't we? Am I overstating this, or do

you know what I mean? Do you know what it's like to be out of control, without a reference point, unable to change or affect the events swirling around you?

“Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord.” The Psalmist has captured a piece of life that we all know, and expressed it for all time in language we can all understand.

Why should we feel unsupported? Why would the child held up in the water by a parent? They should know better. We know better. But if intellectual assent were all that faith required, well, then, we'd all feel warm, fuzzy, and confident, even in the depths of misery and tribulation. Just trust God! It'll be fine; the wound will heal over.

But we don't trust God, at least not completely, because that sort of radical reliance is more than mind over matter, or will over mind: it's a piece of our humanity that just can't make the final step and let go, place ourselves before God and *trust*.

Trust. Trust that God really cares, really knows what we're going through, really has our best interests – or at least humanity's best interests – at heart.

There is this scary stretch of deep water between God's great plan and our everyday existence. Really horrible things happen, and when they do, well, trust is hard to come by, and we question God. We get

angry with God. We can even feel that God owes us an explanation of why things are happening this way. God, you're messing things up here.

Working in addiction recovery with people who'd suffered deep loss, I'd invite them to imagine that God was sitting with us, right next to them. What would they ask God about their loss, if they knew they'd get an answer?

You may have asked God some hard questions, yourself.

It seems to me that there are three possibilities that God might give for an answer. One would be something so complex, so wrapped up in the atoms of the universe, that we couldn't understand it. Another is that God might say, "That's just the way it works," or that "Some things just happen."

And then there's the third possibility: the answer is so straightforward that we can't accept it. We don't accept God's reasons. They don't meet *our* standards. That's when we find ourselves having a hard time forgiving God.

The important part of Psalm 130 here is that we don't have to be able to forgive God for God to forgive us. In fact, we have to accept God's forgiveness to let go of our resentments against God.

Verse four says it straight out: "...forgiveness is with you, that's why you are honored."

Which brings us to the place where I've found myself, and maybe you have been, too: "My whole being waits for my Lord – more than the night watch waits for morning; yes, more than the night watch waits for morning!" Part of that has to do with accepting God's forgiveness for our not forgiving God. Deep inside us, there's God-ache that yearns for God's healing touch.

Have you ever stood watch? Not necessarily a military or security or fire watch, though if you have, you get the psalmist's point really well.

You may have stood watch with a loved one – a child, a parent, a sibling, a friend, a patient, a care receiver. Watched over them in the middle of the night, and wondered, how long will the night last? These are times spent in the Psalmist's depths, waiting, watching.

Once, early in my ministry, I spent a night holding a dying woman's hand, praying with her that God would take her right then because she could no longer bear to live. That was a time to wait and watch for morning, for God's dawn which she so desperately wanted to see, sitting and praying in the middle of those bottomless depths of not knowing how to help, what to say, how to pray, struggling around trying to find something of God to stand on to be able to support her.

These times are some of the mysteries of God. A “mystery” isn’t something completely unknown, it’s something for which we know the outcome, but that can’t explain the process.

The mystery is this: we have to let God be God. And part of our God being God was to send his son to us to die what seems a senseless, horrible, agonizing death – even to know what it feels like to be abandoned by God – so that we can have this simple, basic thing: forgiveness for our sins, our failings, our debts, our trespasses, which makes it possible for us truly to forgive those who have hurt every one of us so deeply.

Even God.