

Poverty Initiative Leadership School Chapel  
Wilkes-Barre, PA  
July 10, 2011  
Rev. Shelly Fayette

Psalm 9: 9:-20

The LORD is a stronghold for the oppressed,  
A stronghold in time of trouble.  
And those who know your name put their trust in you,  
For you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you.

Sing praises to the LORD, who dwells in Zion.  
Declare his deeds among the peoples.  
For he who avenges blood is mindful of them;  
He does not forget the cry of the afflicted.

Be gracious to me, O LORD.  
See what I suffer from those who hate me;  
You are the one who lifts me up from the gates of death,  
So that I may recount all of your praises,  
And, in the gates of daughter Zion,  
Rejoice in your advances.

The nations have sunk in the pit they have made,  
In the net that they hid has their own foot been caught.  
The LORD has made himself known,  
He has executed judgment;  
The wicked are snared in the work of their own hands.  
*Higgaion Selah*

The wicked shall depart to Sheol,  
All the nations that forget God.

For the needy shall not always be forgotten,  
Nor the hope of the poor perish forever.

Rise up, O LORD! Do not let mortals prevail;  
Let the nations be judged before you.  
Put them in fear, O LORD;  
Let the nations know that they are only human.  
*Selah*

This psalm is traditionally attributed to David. And when we hear it, we recognize it. We hear the truth ringing within it, because we are a room full of Davids, loading our slings to take on a world of Goliaths.

We, in this room, are staring down one particular Goliath, and he's massive and he's armed, and I'm speaking now of the Goliath of poverty. We can travel back in the Scriptures to 1 Samuel, and we can read about the armor of Goliath. We know that Goliath looked impenetrable. He had everything he needed to keep himself safe: a helmet made of bronze. A mail coat that weighed as much as David himself. A bronze javelin, sharpened and ready for a taste of David's flesh.

We have been learning these days about what the armor of Goliath looks like in our time, those things that keep poverty from being ended for once and for all.

Our Goliath wears a helmet of professional politicians and intellectuals who tell us what to think about poverty, about why it happens and oh its so tragic but if only poor people weren't so lazy and if one poor people would stop having so many babies and if only poor people didn't rack up so much debt and if only they would stop eating at McDonalds they could be thin and healthy and rich like us and also maybe then they could find a nice little job and get off welfare and be decent people.

We have a metal mail coat, made of all the obstacles in place designed to keep us from accessing the services we need for our bodies, from healthcare and food and housing and clean running water. This coat grows thicker, and heavier, each time a decision is made to treat one of these basic human rights like it is a commodity.

We see a javelin made of the military and police forces that think nothing of beating us up and telling us to keep on moving you can't sleep on that park bench and lady I'll run you in for being a prostitute unless you suck my dick.

Our Goliath is massive, and ugly. We are staring down this Goliath, loading our slings. We are readying ourselves for the fight that we didn't ask for, the fight that has come to us unasked, the fight that has come to our people, just like it did for David. And we are going to do it with the simple tools we have at hand, just as David did, with his slingshot and one stone.

Our simple but deadly weapon is our organization, and our small rock, is the truth. With these two things, we have all that we need and more to deal a fatal blow to poverty.

Every piece of information we get about the history of our struggle and of each other's struggle, each connection we make, each piece of the puzzle we put together, each time we listen to someone else's story, is another rock in that sling that will bring down the powers of this earth, the empires of this world.

We have the power to do the impossible, to slay the giant. We have the power to end poverty, against all odds. And we will.

The needy will not always be forgotten, and the hope of the poor will not be crushed forevermore. The staggering scope of the forces arrayed against us will only make our victory more sweet. And the strength and the gifts and laughter and the joy of this room is so powerful that no earthly force can contain it.

But my friends, I must offer something of a cautionary tale. Because David's story didn't end with the slaying of that one wild and shaggy man. David grew up. He grew into a beautiful man, with dark skin and shining eyes. By all accounts, David was pretty. And he ascended to the throne. The young man who took down the Philistine Goliath then sat in the golden chair himself and was king of all he saw.

But it seems in that ascent he forgot who he was. He had his pick of women. But one day he saw a woman bathing on the roof and demanded her. She came to him, by no accounts willingly, due in part to the fact that she was married to a wonderful and upright man who was away at war. And that night with David she experienced what many young women experience at the hands of men with all the power. And she became pregnant. David, hoping to cover his crime, asked for her husband to be sent home, so that he might sleep with his wife and the baby might be considered his own. But because her husband was so committed to his position, and to his people, that he refused to do so, in keeping with the custom that men should not have intimate relations with their wives while in the act of war. He returned to his battlefield without touching his wife. David ordered him sent to the front lines, where he was sure to be killed, and in fact it comes to pass that he was killed. And David took Bathsheba. And she had that baby, and that baby died.

David forgot who he was. It did not take much of a taste of adulation and attention to turn him away from who he was, just as it does not take much of the world's seductive, domesticating, calming, lulling attention to make us forget who we are. And who are we?

We are the new and unsettling force. We are the community that loves the world, each other and ourselves so intensely that we think all are worth saving. We are the untamed, the beautiful, the powerful, the organized. We are the carriers of stories, and the bearers of light. We are those upon whom God has placed a call on our hearts so strong and so bright that we have followed it here through the long, winding paths of our own lives and histories to this place, in this moment, with each other. We are leaders. All due respect to the Poverty Initiative glossary, but I don't think a leader is just someone who can accurately assess a situation and provide a solution. Leaders make accurate assessments, discern solutions, and then bust their butts to mobilize the people to make that solution happen.

Our weapon is our relationships, and our rock is our truth.

Without our relationships, without our organization, we will not survive the battle before us. Just as the LORD has not forgotten us, we must not forget each other. It is

desperately important that as we move and live and work with one another that we treat each other with extreme tenderness. I don't mean this in any kind of wishy washy "oh that's so sugary sweet I think I'll just barf" kind of way. If you've heard me cursing like the fisherman's daughter that I am this weekend, you'll know that I don't mean this in any cheap or sappy way. I'm not all that touchy feely, which is why I didn't particularly enjoy my time at Union, but that's another story for another day.

Despite that, I am convinced of the revolutionary power of tenderness. I'm going to share with you a piece of advice I found on that bastion of intelligence, the internet. Yes, I know, but God works all ways and God is speaking online, no matter how much we try to drown God out. And the piece of advice is this:

Be careful with one another  
so we can be dangerous together.

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To be extremely tender with one another means to treat each other, both as individuals and as organizations, with the extreme kindness that is necessary for trust, and for love. It means to see each other clearly, to see through everything that the world wants to place over our eyes to convince us that we are separate. The LORD has not forgotten our cry. The least we can do is not forget each other, and ourselves. We will need both trust and love, in enormous quantities, as we work together to build a world of justice, and righteousness. Each person here is a gift to each other person here. Each person here carries something that each other one of us needs to be able to do what we do, with full hearts. I know this may seem impossible, but not every organization in this room has always been kind to every other organization in this room. Not every organizer in this room has always been kind to every other organizer in this room. Not every organization in this room has been kind to its own members.

Be careful with one another,  
so we can be dangerous together.

Remember who you are as you leave this space. Remember that our righteous weapon is our relationships, our network, our organization. Sometimes, when we own our own power, when we come into our own power and truly inhabit it, it can be extremely tempting to test it out on one another. Resist that temptation. Remember to turn that power on those who are actually pulling the strings to keep us poor, and sick, and lonely, and scared.

Nothing delights them more than seeing us pick away at each other bit by bit.

Lean into your own generosity of spirit.

Lend an ear. Open doors for each other, both literally and metaphorically. Offer yourselves to the politicians who need you. Don't elect them, send them to the wolves, and then act surprised when they come back with bloody bite marks and raggedly clothing. Eat together. Tell each other your funniest jokes. Learn something about the place where the other comes from. Young people, be very, very suspicious of any organizing body you belong to that doesn't have any elders in it. You need the people who have been organizing for two or three of your lifetimes already. Older people, please nurture us younger leaders. Don't cut your eyes at us, like we're coming to take your jobs. We are hungry to learn from you. Spend time with us. Listen to us. Give us real jobs and not just mundane tasks. Make sure women have a voice in your organization because we've been used to looking at things from below for a long, long time. Be generous with your time. Support one another when personal calamity comes, because personal tragedy comes to all of us – and when it does, ask what you can do to help.

In other words, live the life of the reconciled and beloved community of God. God has already done a great work among us. God has given us the tremendous gift and the shocking responsibility to be the un-settlers of a nation. Remember what it felt like to be in this space, knowing that we are part of something so much bigger and so much more beautiful than anything we could ever create alone. Remember that God is with you, that God is our stronghold, our steadfast lover, our beacon, our light, and our hope.

The LORD has not forgotten us. Do not forget yourselves.

Be very, very careful with one another  
so we can be dangerous together.