

Proper Posture Matters

Psalm 5:1-8, 11

Rev. Melissa Hatfield, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, Missouri

June 12, 2016

LISTEN: <http://fbcjc.buzzsprout.com/7678/391607-proper-posture-matters>

Sit up straight. Shoulders back. Stop slouching. Both feet on the floor.

Some of you just heard your mother's voice and, without thinking, adjusted your posture.

Those are but a few of the marching orders of proper posture. Last week on our senior trip to Virginia we had a discussion one night over dinner about the "elbows off the table" rule. There is an old saying, "*Mable, Mable, strong and able, keep your elbows off the table, this is not a horse's stable, but a fancy dining table.*" Any of you ever heard that before? I don't think German Chancellor Angela Merkel has because here is a picture of her at a fancy dining table with Facebook founder, Mark Zuckerberg. Yep - elbows on the table. Maybe Germany never heard of Mable.

None of us around the table knew the official reason "no elbows on the table" is proper but we took some guesses. In the end most of us decided it was a stupid rule and proceeded to shovel food into our mouths like pigs at a trough.

Over the years I've been instructed and corrected many times about proper posture. I tend to slouch. Sometimes I work at my computer as if there's a 40-pound monkey sitting on my shoulders. At home on the couch, I tend to tuck my legs up under me and lean to the left. Years of improper posture have caught up and, on occasion, my body will gently and kindly let me know that I've broken posture rules and we need to go see our friend, the chiropractor.

As annoying as it can be, proper posture does matter but not just physical posture. Posture definitely means a position of a person's body but it also means a particular way of dealing with or considering something; an approach or attitude. So not only is physical posture important for living well but so is our mental, emotional and spiritual posture. How we orient our minds and our spirits. What position we place our entire being in as we live each day and encounter varied situations and circumstances. And if we don't practice proper posture things become out of balance. Our bodies are out of balance. Our minds and emotions are out of balance. Our faith is out of balance.

Psalm 5 is rich with language about posture. In the Message translation, verses 2 and 3 read, *Every morning you'll hear me at it again. Every morning I lay out the pieces of my life on your altar and watch for fire to descend.* In verse 8 - *I enter your house, prostrate (lying flat out on the ground with your face to the floor) in your inner sanctum, waiting for directions.* In verse 11 - *you'll welcome us with open arms when we run for cover to you.*

As we prepare to listen to David and his prayer this morning, I want us to engage in a slight posture adjustment. There is no charge and no one will be walking around to pop anything back into place. And we aren't secretly practicing an eastern religion. So, just relax.

Our hands are miraculous in design and function, with a unique balance of strength and finesse, but they are more than tools. We recognize the power of a firm handshake to convey trust, the invitation of a soft touch on the shoulder to say, "I understand and am here for you," and the intimacy of walking hand in hand. In yoga, hand positions called mudras (moo-dras) are used to intensify the effect of body postures. Mudras are thought to invoke qualities such as patience or peacefulness and presence.

When the palms are turned up, the shoulders rotate outward and the chest opens. When upward palms are used in meditation or prayer, they position both the mind and the body in a posture that enhances listening. By simply sitting at a desk or a table or in pew and turning our palms up or down, we can feel the subtle differences in our body postures and breathing. The mind responds in kind. So when we seek to really listen and be more open, perhaps it helps to turn the palms to the heavens. One of my favorite authors, Bob Goff, talks about how he will sit in meetings with his palms open and up under the table resting on his legs. He finds that it helps him to listen more rather than being defensive.

May I simply suggest a physical posture change for this morning? For the remainder of the sermon I want to invite you to sit with your hands in your laps with palms open and up. Perhaps if we can practice a posture of the body that encourages us to listen than our minds and hearts will listen as well.

Psalm 5 is known as a lament. We often don't spend a lot of time focusing on the psalms of lament. The modern, western church is somewhat uncomfortable with the brutal honesty and the vulnerability of these psalms. However, there are more laments among the psalms than any other type of psalm. We don't preach on them often and a lot of our songs, prayers, and studies tend to be a little too sanitized and safe. Theologian Walter Brueggeman calls psalms of laments "disorienting psalms". They are disorienting because the prayer comes from a place of discouragement and fear, a place of frustration and even anger, a place where there isn't clarity on why something is happening and what, if anything, God is doing about it. All is not well and the faithful one, King David in this case, is experiencing terror because of lies. We don't really know the exact situation that David is referring to but that really isn't important. We can tell from his pleas to God that he is being assaulted by words - lies, rumors, insults. Sticks and stones will break our bones but words - well, words can break our hearts and our spirits.

Have you ever experienced pain at the hand of words? Has there been in a time in your life when people were saying lies about you? Where and from whom did they come? Co-workers? Friends? Family members? Or are the lies crushing your spirit and stealing your peace lies you

tell yourself? That inner voice that says you aren't good enough. The lies that say you don't measure up and you're a failure.

Maybe someone you love has been attacked by lies. Three years ago this coming July, a good friend of mine, Chad Rogers, went missing for about a week. He went for an evening run and never came home. It got a lot of attention in the Kansas City area as hundreds of his friends, including me, gathered every day to search wooded areas and neighborhoods for him. They ended up finding his body in a porta potty near a construction area. Turns out he had a heart problem, had gotten ill on his run and went to the bathroom where he had a heart attack and died. It hurt deeply to lose this amazing friend and young dad. But some of the worst pain came from what people were saying about him in the news and online. Because he was a young guy covered in tattoos, because he was a stay at home dad, because of some previous job situations, they made assumptions about Chad. Assumptions like he ran away from his wife and his baby boy. That he was using drugs. That he was guilty of crimes. People asked me about whether any of these things were true. Chad's dad asked me to talk to the police, to vouch for his character. I didn't hesitate. Because I knew Chad. I knew his heart. I knew his character and I trusted what I knew. It hurt deeply to hear the Lie-speakers, the blood-thirsty, the truth-benders spreading their lies about my friend. Just like King David, we found ourselves crying out to God every morning for help and for justice. For God to silence them and to pile on the guilt.

When you think about how lies have hurt you or someone you love, you can understand David's posture of crying out to God to protect himself and to punish the offenders. You can see yourself lying flat out on the ground, waiting for God's help to get you safely through enemy lines. It is a proper posture when we are grieving, hurting, angry, confused and disoriented.

But we must also ask the question - are we ever part of telling lies? Are we ever the mischief makers, the lie speakers, the truth benders? In stories and scripture, we are quick to see ourselves in the victim, the persecuted, the righteous. No one ever watches Cinderella and thinks, "Hmmm You know, I actually see a lot of myself in the ugly step sister." We aren't wired to do that by default. But we must always humble ourselves enough to look into the mirror of scripture and see if we can be found in the accused. Perhaps an election year is an excellent time for us to ponder which role we might be playing at times. (your palms are still open, right? Make sure they didn't involuntarily switch into clenched fists on that last statement).

So many psalms of lament begin in despair but end in delight. And Psalm 5 is no different. Look at verses 11 and 12 again, "But you'll welcome us with open arms when we run for cover to you. Let the party last all night! Stand guard over our celebration. You are famous, GOD, for welcoming God-seekers, for decking us out in delight." David trusts that he is welcome to come into God's court every morning and lay out his grievances before the true King. He states what is happening and names his grief but he doesn't end there. He doesn't curl up in a fetal position, overcome by his enemies. He ends with proclaiming the goodness of the Lord -

despite the present circumstances. He finishes by orienting himself once again to the truth that God is trustworthy above all circumstances he might face. David places his hands out, palms up in surrender - not to his enemies but to his God.

This week I posed a question on Facebook asking people to share if trusting God is difficult for them, and if so, why? So many people responded either in comments or private messages and I was so grateful for their honesty. People commented about how they were blessed by reading what others wrote because it allowed them to realize they weren't alone in their own struggles to trust God. People that were more chronologically gifted (older and wiser) gave witness to God's faithfulness over the years and how that has made trusting God easier. It was a reminder of the importance of sharing our stories - the good, the bad, the ugly - because our stories give hope and strength to others and to ourselves as we remember the goodness and faithfulness of our God.

One of the clear themes was that it is difficult to trust God because it feels like a loss of control. And many of us really, really love control. (Don't point fingers or elbow your spouse. That isn't proper posture.) When times are difficult or plans don't work out like we thought they would or we simply can't see what is next, we find ourselves scrambling, disoriented. It feels awful and frightening to sit with palms open in front of us during those moments. What we typically do is start grabbing at things or people or decisions or bad habits in order to help us feel safe again. We cry out to God during those times for clarity. Just show me the plan, God. But is that really what we need?

When the brilliant ethicist John Kavanaugh went to work for three months at "the house of the dying" in Calcutta, he was seeking a clear answer as to how best to spend the rest of his life. On the first morning there he met Mother Teresa. She asked, "And what can I do for you?" Kavanaugh asked her to pray for him. "What do you want me to pray for?" she asked. He voiced the request that he had borne thousands of miles from the United States: "Pray that I have clarity."

She said firmly, "No, I will not do that." When he asked her why, she said, "Clarity is the last thing you are clinging to and must let go of." When Kavanaugh commented that she always seemed to have the clarity he longed for, she laughed and said, "I have never had clarity; what I have always had is trust. So I will pray that you trust God."

Could it be that in craving clarity we are attempting to eliminate the risk of trusting God? Might it be that clarity is just another false sense of security that we are grabbing for?

When all else is unclear, when our enemies without and within are assailing us, the heart of trust says, as Jesus did on the cross, "Into your hands I commit my spirit". (Luke 23:46). It is a posture of palms open in front of us - not desperately grasping for answers or clinging to false safety but open palms of trust and surrender.

Clarity does not bring peace. Only trust in God brings peace.

My favorite author, Brennan Manning, said this in his book, *Ruthless Trust* - **“I can state unequivocally that childlike surrender in trust is the defining spirit of authentic discipleship.”** The most urgent need we have is not clarity but an unfaltering trust in the love of God.

David, the most beloved figure of Jewish history, was no stranger to terror, loneliness, failure, and even sinister plots to destroy him; yet he ravished the heart of God with his unwavering trust. Listen to some of his words from his other psalms.

Psalm 56:3-4 - “When I am most afraid, I put my trust in you; in God whose word I praise, in God I put my trust fearing nothing; what can men do to me?”

Psalm 26:1 - “My trust in God never wavers”.

Psalm 18:19 - “He rescued me, since he loves me.”

Psalm 13:5 - “But I for my part rely on your love, O Lord”.

Psalm 40:4 - “Happy the man who puts his trust in Yahweh”

Psalm 52:9 - “I mean to thank you for doing what you did, and put my trust in your name, that is so full of kindness, in the presence of those who love you.”

Psalm 52: 8 - “I, for my part, like an olive tree growing in the house of God, put my trust in God’s love for ever and ever.

Behold the splendor of a human heart, which trusts that it is loved.

Maybe your sitting there thinking - “But I don’t know how to trust God, Melissa.” I’ve got good news and bad news for you. **The bad news for you Type-A’s:** you can’t do anything about it. Growth in trust cannot be self-initiated. It isn’t something you can grab onto or conjure up. There isn’t a “Ten Step Plan to Trust God by Friday” book. Well, there may be but I probably wouldn’t buy it. **The good news:** Trust happens as a result of allowing our unworthy, ungrateful selves to be loved as we are. You will trust God to the degree that you know you are loved by him. Stopped trying to grab for it or do the heavy lifting. You’re going to throw your back out. Trust is a palms open posture we assume every day, every hour, every minute - trusting the character and love of God above all circumstances. Proper posture really matters.

In the words of the great theologian John Lennon, *“Everything will be okay in the end. If it's not okay, it's not the end.”* In the meantime, every morning and every night we lay out the pieces of our lives on God’s altar and with palms open we allow God to love us as only our merciful and generous God can do.