

July 9, 2017

Scripture Psalm 150

Preached at Crossroads United Church of Christ

Indianola, IA

WORD FOR THE DAY: PRAISE

Today is a very special day. It is my mother's 100th birthday. And she would approve of the topic of today, PRAISE. I have trouble with the concept of Praise. She did not. She was and I suspect still is a positive person. Glass half full etc.

When I told my parents I was gay, my father went into denial, but not mom. She never went in that direction. She said she didn't understand but that she thought I was the happiest I had been for a long time. And it was that sense of my happiness that carried her through to acceptance. I never doubted that I was fully loved by her no matter what. I wish that all kids could have a mom like her.

She also loved it when I would bring friends on my visits to my parents in New Jersey and later to Connecticut, from college or graduate school or from Indianola. I had an Iranian roommate in college who came home with me one year. Mom didn't bat an eyelash and immediately got into conversation with him. No matter how busy she was she had time to talk with anyone. She was skilled at making these friends of my feel at home and welcomed them into her family.

Once in Chicago I took Mom and Dad to the Art Institute. I dropped them off and I went to park the car. When I returned Dad was by himself. He said that mom had wandered off and when I went looking for her, I found her engaged in serious conversation with a big black man who was also waiting for the museum to open.

She was not afraid to step out of her comfort zone to engage with other people. Dad not so much.

Another time I brought my gay friends Mark and Dan home for a couple of days. After we finished dinner I was helping Mom with the dishes. Dan went outside with my father to help him trim some branches from a

tree and Mark sat down at the piano and played a medley of hymn tunes. How could they not like gay people? I was worried the guys had gone too far.

Let's get back to Psalm 150. Praise Humm.

Praise is a common word in the scriptures. It is everywhere in the Psalms. In Psalm 150 the word praise appears 12 times in 6 verses.

Duke Ellington, in his Sacred Concert series put Psalm 150 into the Jazz medium. He wrote two Jazz compositions utilizing the traditional jazz instruments. In the psalm, specific instruments are mentioned, trumpet, lute, harp tambourine, strings, pipes and not only cymbals, but loud crashing cymbals, virtually every instrument available at the time of David. No musical instrument was too loud, too clanging, too clashing, or too "vulgar" to praise the Israelite God.

That is not how I was brought up. Jazz was not very acceptable with my parents. And it was not only certain kinds of music that were unacceptable. It was also dancing, which I was taught was the work of

the Devil. In high school I once even refused, for religious reasons, to participate in dance lessons which were apart of gym class.

And where is this praising done? In his sanctuary and in his mighty firmament. Everywhere in other words.

And by everything. “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord.”

My problem with praise is how I hear it. It sounds to me like “Everything that breathes *should* praise the Lord”. And if they don’t God won’t like that. God wants and needs to be praised and you won’t curry his favor unless you adore and praise God.

I don’t like this interpretation. It smacks of a God who is insecure and needs praise for self-valuation. This came to my mind a week or two ago when Donald Trump had that strange meeting with his cabinet. When they were all assembled he demanded each one in turn make a short speech of how much they appreciated his choosing them for a position in his administration and how honored they were to serve him. It seemed to me incredibly bizarre.

God doesn't need anything from us. What God does for and with us is solely because God wants to, for people and really for a world, he deeply cares for and loves.

Several years ago I was meeting with my freshman class and before the class began two students were talking and one asked the other if he was coming to the Wednesday chapel service. He said no because they just sang those praise songs, those 7-11 songs. I asked what he meant by 7-11. He said you know, 7 words repeated 11 times.

Many churches have praise worship events. Somehow those services seem to me empty and void of meaning because they fail to deal with real people's lives in which as Julia reminded us in last week's sermon, tragedy coexists with joy. Praise when it is demanded, particularly by the dominant one, loses its meaning both for the giver and the demander.

I got a note from a student after she graduated in which she said: "It was not always a pleasure being in your class but the conversations we had outside of class challenged me and changed me. Thank you." That is praise that I cherish.

So here is my take on all this praise bit. There are several parts to this sermon.

1. God's love for us is a constant, never wavering. In good times and in bad times, in sickness and in health, in richness and in poorness, when we can think clearly and when we are confused, when we are of sound mind and when we have Alzheimer's disease, when we feel loved and when we feel alone, always.

Our realization that that is what is going on in the midst of our tragedy and joy is our praise. When we realize this as a reality for us, we live our lives differently. Knowing that we are loved and understood makes all the difference.

I had a student who graduated a number of years ago. She was not the best student, earning mediocre grades. She wanted to go to Dental school and asked me to write a letter for her. I did, but I had to be honest and so the letter was not without reservations. She did not get

accepted. Nor did she get accepted the next year as well. She moved on and got a degree in student development and worked in that field for several years. She found herself not all that satisfied with that as a career and so decided to again apply to Dental school. Recently she returned to Simpson and found me in the library. I did not recognize her at first because she looked different somehow.

Her first words to me were, “Dr. Warnet I want to apologize for being such a pain in the neck when I was a student.” She then told me what had happened since I last saw her and her continuing desire to become a dentist. I asked her what had changed for her to again try for admission to Dental school.

She told me that she had recently learned that her hearing was failing and that in about 2 year she would be total deaf. I asked her how she felt about that development and without hesitation she told me it was the best thing that had ever happened to her. This tragedy changed her whole life. Instead of always blaming someone else for the negative things in her life she began to take responsibility for herself. That is

why I did not recognize her at first. She shed her negativity and developed a positive attitude.

She was so thankful that her impending loss of hearing is leading her to a more fulfilling life. Her dream of becoming a dentist was made possible by her hearing loss because that tragedy changed her. She is a better person now and the hearing loss is no big deal. She moved to an attitude of praise.

Several weeks later she let me know she was accepted into Dental school.

When we know we are loved we can better take on the cares of others in addition to our own. We can also stop the cycle of increasing violence and hatred that often envelops humans.

I had this experience with John a lab mate when I was at Emory who was one angry boy. When he lashed out at a fellow grad student, he explained his behavior that he had to lash out because you can't let people walk all over you. I thought to myself, of course you can. That is not the end of the world, but to him it was. We get the same message

from our current president who needs to lash out daily at people who are critical of him. Nothing rolls off his back. He doesn't know that God loves him.

2. Our relationship with other people with whom we share this planet becomes our praise

Every human is a child of God, even immigrants, black people, criminals, even Putin, even Trump. Yeah we know this, right. Then why are we so afraid of immigrants and people of color. Why are we afraid they might change our culture? We need to celebrate and praise God for our Human diversity.

When I was in Tahiti, my students wrote a variety of papers and Terry Hodge wrote on the need to preserve the diversity of plants. He stated the usual arguments: a diverse gene pool is much more resilient toward diseases. Mono culture is susceptible when a new disease appears, or changing weather patterns or when we need something new from a plant or microorganism.

It was a rather good, ordinary paper until near the end he wrote that the cultural diversity of humans should be preserved for much the same reasons we need to protect biological diversity. I had never heard that argument, but the more I thought about it that more I realized the connections between these two kinds of diversity.

But the world is moving in the opposite direction. American culture is so massive and pervasive that other cultures are just steam rolled into oblivion. Many ideas are being lost that could be of use to us in the future.

Other cultures are a gift from God and is another reason to praise God. They are to be celebrated and treasured. They have sustained peoples around the world for thousands of year. They often contain and demonstrate some universal truth in different and often revealing ways. They might someday be our salvation.

To not value diversity is to devalue God's Creation. God is not praised when we do not value the tremendous and beautiful diversity God created in this amazing world.

3. Every living organism is of God, even ticks and slime molds and cougars and deer. While I was in Germany a friend of mine emailed me to suggest I read a biography of Alexander von Humboldt, a German naturalist who lived until he was 90 years old in 1859.

The next day I was waiting for my friends, Pat and Rich in the Deutsches Museum in Berlin so I went to the gift shop which was mostly a book store and there was the very book, a biography of Alexander von Humboldt, in English even. So I bought it of course.

Humboldt was fascinated by nature. He wanted to know everything. He was from a rich Prussian family and had plenty of money. So he could travel in the late 1700's. Not so easy then as it is now.

He was fascinated by volcanos which he climbed when he was in Italy. Mounts Etna and Vesuvius. He began to think that possibly they were connected because they did the same thing, erupt. Then he learned there were volcanos in South America, so he booked passage and landed in what is now Panama. He then *walked* from Panama to Chile climbing

every volcano between the two. He collected some 40,000 biological samples, packed them out and took them back to Europe. He had notebooks full of his observations.

On his way back to Europe he then detoured to Washington DC to meet with Jefferson who solicited Humboldt's advice for his planning the expedition of Lewis and Clark. Years later Humboldt also explored Russia ending up in Mongolia using a horse and carriage through mostly road-less areas. He used some 12000 horses in the trip.

He began to formulate a new understanding of nature no longer as a series of interesting but unconnected objects and events but as parts of a whole. He was into relationships. Humboldt is responsible for our current ideas about nature that we use to this day.

He also noted human interaction with nature and predicted early on what we now know as human caused climate change. He wrote extensively of his discoveries. He was known around the world as a keen observer of nature. He rejoiced in understanding nature. He has more natural

features around the world named for him than any other person. When he died, there were ceremonies around the world marking his death. In Chicago 15,000 came out in a pouring rain to listen to speeches attesting to his greatness.

He knew God's creation better and more thoroughly than any other human at that time. He paid attention to the intricacies of nature and its relationship to humans. We can do the same, by paying attention to this incredible creation. That is yet another way to praise God. Praise God in God's mighty firmament.

4. We praise God by embracing the sense of wonder and awe at God's creation. Every flower, every fruit, every bee, every handful of soil or compost or manure praises God.

And when we realize this we will act differently in our relationships, in our politics, in our homes and in our jobs. With people we love and with people we don't know, and with people we have disagreements. This is not some onerous task we do to curry God's favor. It is fundamentally a better and more joyous way to live and love. Praise God,

Psalm 150-Praise God

Hallelujah! (which means Praise God)

Praise God in the creation.

Praise God in the depths of the heart.

Praise God for the slow progress of life.

Praise God for the promptings that help us grow.

Praise God with words, with creative acts, with deeds of kindness.

Praise God with contrite hearts and silent resolutions.

Praise God with our living and loving

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AMEN

Benediction:

Be the Church

Protect the environment

Care for the Poor

Forgive Often

Reject Racism

Fight for the powerless

Share earthly and spiritual resources

Embrace diversity

Love God

Praise God

This service is ended. Go in Peace.