

David and the Healing Grace of Giving Thanks

I Chronicles 29:10-14

Psalm 103

Sue and I were talking about the blessing before the meal and how it used to be called “saying grace.” “John, would you say grace for us today?” I have new appreciation for the phrase.

This is the heart of today’s sermon. All is grace. And life is so much richer if we say grace over everything good in our lives. So today’s sermon is about the healing grace of giving thanks.

David knew this, that all is grace. He has been called the Singer of Israel, and we will take a look at one of his most loved psalms of thanksgiving, Psalm 103.

I

But first, let’s start with a moment later in his life. His dream was to build the temple in Jerusalem. But God told him this was not to be; his son Solomon would build the temple. What did he do with his shattered dream? With this great disappointment? He did not mope. Rather, he set about to raise the money, silver, gold and jewels to build the temple he himself would not build! He was

helping to build a temple he would not see built, not for himself but for God and all the future generations.

When the day came to dedicate all that had been raised for the building of the temple, he prayed a remarkable prayer of thanksgiving:

Blessed are you, O Lord...

yours are the greatness, the power,

The glory, the victory and the majesty;

for all that is in the heavens and on earth is yours....

But who am I and what is my people,

that we should be able to make this freewill offering?

And now the key line:

For all things come from you

and of your own have we given you.

The old hymn captures the words:

We give thee but thine own,

Whate'er the gift may be.

When we dedicated this church building in 1981, forty years ago, it was with the same spirit. In thanksgiving to God, and not for ourselves alone, but for God and all who would come after—like all of us sitting here today!

David helps us say grace over every good thing in our lives, who we are, and all we've been given. All is grace.

II

The psalms of David are filled with thanksgiving. They tune our hearts to give God thanks. As the hymn goes,

Come, Thou fount of every blessing,
tune our hearts to sing God's grace.

The Psalmist begins,

*Bless the Lord, O my soul
and all that is within me bless God's holy name.*

That's the psalm I use when asked to say grace after some have already begun eating: "And all that is *within me*, bless God's holy name."

*Bless the Lord, O my soul
and forget not all God's benefits*

All God's blessings.

It's all too easy for us to count our hurts and grievances rather than our blessing. That's why we need this psalm! I know choir members who want to sing

next to the strongest voice in their section. It helps them sing their notes and lines. David's psalms help us sing our lines as we stand next to the Singer of Israel. They help us say what we most need to say to God.

III

The next part of the psalm is a personal psalm of thanksgiving for all that God has done, helping us name our blessings.

Our God is the one

Who forgives all your iniquity.

Forgiveness may be our greatest and final blessing. It sets us free from the burden of sin and from the shackles of guilt, remorse and regret. They are too heavy to carry. God carries them away.

Our God is the one

Who heals all your diseases.

We might rightly say, "not *all* diseases!", and this is true. Sometimes the body no longer has the capacity to heal. But we can say all diseases healed are miracles of God, large ones and small ones. I like band-aids because they say "miracle in progress!" When any wound heals, any illness ends, we should say grace. We can also thank doctors and nurses who help the body heal.

Next, our God is a God

Who redeems our life from the Pit.

In ancient Hebrew thought the Pit was the place of darkness and despair, powerlessness, hopelessness and trouble, the place of abandonment and isolation. I think we've all been there, in the Pit, at some points in our lives.

Sometimes people have nightmares of falling into a deep pit of darkness. But God redeems us from the Pit.

In a short novel by Wendell Berry, *Remembering*, Andy Catlett, a farmer, has lost his right hand in a farming accident. Berry describes his loss:

His right hand has been the one with which he reached out to the world and attached himself to it. When he lost his hand he lost his hold....All the world then became to him a steep slope, and he a man descending, staggering and falling, unable to reach out to tree trunk or branch or root to catch and hold on.

Have you ever felt like that? But this is what he learned, the grace given to him: "Though he does not hold, he is held."¹ This is the gospel, though we lose our hold, we are held, held in the Everlasting Arms. God redeems us first in the Pit, then *from* the Pit.

In these last two years of pandemic we have been in a deep pit. It has been most difficult for almost all of us. But we are here, alive, we and most of those we love. We have been redeemed from the Pit, and *give thanks* this day.

The Psalmist goes on, our God is a God

Who crowns our lives with steadfast love and mercy.

Yes, the steadfast love of the book of Ruth, *hesed*, the never-giving-up-no-matter-what love of God. And mercy! What would we do without God's living streams of mercy? In one of Jesus' parables he tells of workers grumbling that the workers hired late got paid the same as they did. "No fair!" And Jesus answered, I effect, "At the end of the day, at the end of your days, would you rather God be fair or generous? A God of perfect justice or a God of mercy? How you answer may save your life.

Our God is a God of mercy, the Final Mercy and everyday mercy. We live our days, as one put it, "Under the Mercy."

Our God is also a God

Who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your life is renewed like the eagles.

Who can explain the goodness of God except as sheer grace. All the goodnesses, a day shimmering with beauty, a husband or wife, a call from a friend, a new job, a

child running into your arms. Or a dog! They come, and our life is renewed like the eagles!

IV

Now the Psalmist turns to the goodness of God extended to others and to all:

The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.

Moses made this known, says the psalmist. God unlocks every prison door. And justice? The philosopher John Rawls in his famous work *Justice*, gives us a thought experiment. What nation in what century would you choose to live in *if* you could not choose *where* you were born in that society? First century Rome, 16th Century France, 19th Century England? What about Statesville 2021? The point is, of course, the more just a society the less difference it would make where in that society you happened to be born. Our God makes justice and calls us alongside as justice-makers.

V

The next section focuses of God's steadfast love and mercy, especially when we err and take the wrong path. Here is God's steadfast love and mercy at work:

God does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

Wait! You mean what we've been told about God is not true? God is not an angry God who punishes us for every sin, every mistake? The noted early American Puritan preacher and theologian, Jonathan Edwards, preached a sermon entitled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." In it he pictured us as spiders suspended on a web over a forever fire. What if God is not like that? Sometimes it is harder to *unlearn* something than to learn something. Jesus brought us a new picture of God. He was as one has quipped, the answer to God's bad reputation

So what does God do with our sins?

As far as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is God's steadfast love toward us....

As far as the east is from the west, so God removes our transgressions from us.

God comes with a U-Haul truck and hauls them away. All of them; all of it, the sin, the guilt, the remorse, the regret.

The Psalm goes on:

As a father, (and we would add, "mother") has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for us...

Jesus spoke of our God as a “*how much more*” God. As hard as we try to love our children—and inevitably fail them some days—*how much more* does our heavenly Father and Mother love us.

I love the next line:

For God knows how we were made,

God remembers we are but dust.

We may think our dust-ness is a negative, sinful thing. But God loves our dust and understands it. Our dust is our human frailty and finitude, the limits of our capacities for power, wisdom and goodness. Our problem is not our dust-ness, but our refusal to acknowledge our dust-ness. Humility comes from the word *humus*, earth. We are formed of the earth. God understands our human frame.

VI

The last stanza of the poem echoes the call to bless the Lord. God’s *hesed* is from *everlasting to everlasting*. Gratitude is our home in the presence of God. Giving thanks is a healing grace. It dispels our gloominess, sweeps away grievance, lifts your eyes and your hearts to all the goodness God has for you.

Benjamin Franklin was not a very religious boy. He hated to say grace at meals and often refused to do so. One day he was helping his father in the barn salt the meat which they would eat in the following year. Young Benjamin asked

to say a blessing over the meat. His father was surprised and asked why?

Benjamin said, “Well, if I bless it now, maybe we won’t have to bless it every day!”

Thanksgiving Day comes but once a year, but God’s blessings come every day.

Conclusion

One of the reasons I like Psalm 103 so much is because I love the hymn which is a paraphrase of it: *Praise my Soul the King of Heaven*. It’s okay to sing it at my funeral. (I like best the United Methodist Hymnal’s inclusive version)

Praise my soul the king of heaven,
to the throne thy tribute bring.

And then like the rolling of the ocean:

Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven
evermore God’s praises sing.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Praise the everlasting King.

Praise the Lord for grace and favor
to all people in distress;

praise God, still the same as ever,

slow to chide and swift to bless.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Glorious is God's faithfulness.

And now the last verse

Father-like God tends and spares us;

well our feeble frame God knows;

Mother-like God gently bears us,

rescues us from all our foes.

Alleluia, Alleluia!

Widely yet God's mercy flows.

How can we ever stop singing?

Praise, Praise, Praise!

1. Wendell Berry, *Remembering. Three Short Novels* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint Press, 2002), 142,167.

