

Gratitude

Psalm 107:1-9, 43

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, (Aug. 4) 2019

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Yes

*It could happen anytime, tornado,
Earthquake, Armageddon. It could happen.
Or sunshine, love, salvation.*

*It could, you know. That's why we wake
and look out – no guarantees
in this life.*

*But some bonuses, like morning,
like right now, like noon,
like evening.*

- William Stafford

William Stafford's poem is a reminder "It could happen anytime, tornado,/ Earthquake, Armageddon" or mass shootings in El Paso and Dayton, Ohio within one day. It could happen. It is happening.

Each day we get up and check the news to see if there is another mass shooting, or if we're in another war, or what's happened on the border, or what hate was spewed on twitter at three in the morning, or what young black man was

shot, or what's happening with the climate, or ... tornado, earthquake, Armageddon.

Part of our challenge is how to be informed without succumbing to despair. How to avoid becoming overwhelmed with fear or anger just like the people with the guns? How do we remain sane? How do we remain human? What's our hope? And of course, the Austin Heights' question: What do we do?

Our lectionary reading from the Psalms helps us, this morning. The Psalmist, says, "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever" (Ps. 107:1). And then he adds, "Let the redeemed of the Lord say so" (v. 2).

Psalm 107 is considered the fullest, clearest example of a song of thanksgiving we have in the Book of Psalms (see Brueggemann and Bellinger, p. 464). Yet notice, that it is not about giving thanks for the good times. The entire psalm gives thanks for God's enduring, steadfast love through crises, challenges, dire straights, and danger. It gives specific example after specific example of God's steadfast love – how God delivered them through the desert (read this from a refugee's perspective), how God saved them in darkness and gloom, healed them in sickness, and brought them through storms at sea (vv. 4-32). No matter how bad, God has always been faithful. In every way, God's love never wavered. Yes, there have been tornados, earthquakes, and Armageddon but through it all God's steadfast, never-giving-up-always-there-always-courageous-always-faithful love, has brought us through. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so!

Let me be clear, there is absolutely no hint that God brings about these catastrophes. God does not cause the evil. There is also no expectation of safety from evil. The Psalmist says God brings us through the evil. There is an immediacy that does not ask or attempt to explain why God has brought us through such things but not others. We don't know about everything. We simply know this one thing: God steadfast love endures forever and has sustained us through it all. In response we give thanks.

And the Psalmist says we need to say so. Psalm 107 does not say we have to feel thanks. But we are to give thanks and say so. Say it with our mouths no matter how we feel. Even on this day when I feel overwhelmed with tragedy I am commanded to offer thanks to God and to say so.

This kind of practice is at the heart of the Bible and Christian tradition. We are not told to feel a certain way but are charged to act a certain way. We are called to practice. After all, feelings, unlike actions, cannot be governed by simple will. Jesus does not ask us to feel loving toward our neighbors and our enemies. We are not called to feel good on a morning when there is such sadness and grief. That would be asking something beyond our control. We cannot feel on command. Instead, Jesus asks us to act.

Love your neighbor as yourself. Turn your cheek. Give to those who beg from you. Serve the needy. Pray without ceasing. Pray for your enemies. Give thanks to God and say so. Don't wait until you feel like it.

Of course, you know what happens. By practicing and actually offering thanks and expressing thanks, we come to be thankful. Eventually, we feel thankful and we are truly thankful. We do it, we say it, and we become it.

This is behind why we teach our children to say, “Thank you.” We want giving thanks and saying thanks, to become a habit, so that eventually our children will truly become people who are thankful. They will become gracious.

John Kralik wrote an interesting book called *365 Thank Yous*, in which he tells about writing a thank you note a day for an entire year. He did not start out because he was feeling particularly thankful or because things were going really well. In fact, it began during a low time in his life. His small law firm was losing money and losing its lease. He was going through a painful divorce and he was living in a small, stuffy apartment where he often slept on the floor under an old, decrepit air conditioner. He was middle-aged, overweight, and at the end of his rope.

He got lost hiking one day and by the time he found his way back, he had resolved to start writing thank-you notes for each day for a year. He writes, “My only problem: Did I have anything to be grateful for? The way my life was going, I hardly thought so.”

He began by writing to the people who were close to him. Then it got harder. Eventually, he came to a day when he couldn’t think of anyone to thank. He stopped at his regular Starbucks, where the barista greeted him by name – “John, your usual venti? – and a big smile. He thought, in this day of “impersonal

relationships, someone cared enough to learn my name and what I drank in the morning.” So he wrote the barista a thank you note. And so it went, for a year.

Over time, saying thank you changed him. He had always considered himself something of an atheist but toward the end of the year he started going to church. He wrote, “The music was plentiful, delivered with... genuine enthusiasm. The dominant message was grace was still available. To everyone. Even to me. I can deal with that, I thought. Through the process of writing thank you notes, I had developed a notion of being blessed with grace.”

Giving and expressing gratitude allows us to experience grace. It makes us gracious.

I am firmly convinced that being and practicing gratitude, being gracious is essential to our survival. For us to remain human in the face of mass shootings, climate change, tornados, earthquakes, and Armageddon, we must practice offering thanks and saying so.

We do not give thanks instead of facing the darkness but in the middle of the darkness. If we cease to say our thanks to God because we are feeling the darkness overwhelm us, then the darkness wins. We are not called to change everything or fix the world. We are called, commanded to simply give thanks to God and say so.

Instead of clinched fists and gritted teeth, as gracious people we open our hands to receive, we open our hands to share with others, we open our hands to grasp each other’s hands, and we open our mouths to sing and speak thanks to God and to each other.

For thirty years it has been the gift of my life to be your pastor. Thirty years! Thirty years of hearing children come up to me and say, “Hello Pastor Kyle!” Thirty years of praying with you during crises, and blessing your marriages, being with you through funerals and grief. Thirty years of eating your good food and thirty years of serving alongside of you on mission. Almost thirty years of hearing Miki and Mary make beautiful music (Mary – 27 years, Miki – 25 years). Thirty years of me standing before you and before God on Sunday mornings, hoping to hear a word from the Lord. Thirty years is a school of gratitude. God has taught me and I hope and pray, helped make me a more gracious person because of me being here and being with you.

The Psalmist writes, “Let the redeemed of the Lord say so!” This morning I say thank you, God for these thirty years and I say thanks to you.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.