

Sermon
Based on Psalm 145:8-19
Preached by the Rev. Cindy Kohlmann

The description of who God is in this Psalm is one that I know that I have returned to on more than one occasion. “The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” I keep that description of who God is close to me, especially in the days when I feel like I need a little more mercy and steadfast love. In the days when I’m sure that my actions or my words do more to merit God’s anger than God’s grace.

These words that describe the One who has called us, the One that we know through Jesus, these words are comforting to us. But as I read them, I think that perhaps they are meant to also be challenging to us.

After all, we know, we believe, we profess that we, humankind, has been created in God’s image. Each one of us bears that divine mark in the very depths of who we are. Our God, who has breathed breath into our lungs, put that fingerprint on our souls.

So if these words describe who God is, aren’t they also describing, at least in part, who we are meant to be? If this is who God is, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, then isn’t that part of who God is imprinted upon us? Upon our deepest selves?

It is not enough to give thanks for God’s mercy and love. We are also meant to live into that image which is woven into who we are.

So what would it mean for us, as followers of Jesus Christ, to claim these words as part of the divine image that lives in us? What would it mean for us to begin to apply these words to our lives? To our words? To our actions?

Instead of simply finding comfort in the fact that the One who is Creator of heaven and earth is merciful and gracious and slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, what if we could begin to say that of one another?

Across this body of Christ that spans the earth, what if we could begin to say of one another: we do indeed know they are Christians by their love, the steadfast love that endures forever, that is the very image of the love God has for the world.

I think you might see where I'm going with this. This whole Psalm is a psalm of praise for who God is and how God acts and how God cares for God's creation. This whole psalm is leading us to raise our voices in gratitude and thanksgiving, in awe for God's majesty, for God's provision, for God's care.

But if the divine image of God that is a thumbprint on our hearts and souls, if that is meant to help us live in a way that reflects that image, then I would say the words of the psalm giving praise for all of God's works are also meant as a call to us.

We are the hands and feet of Christ. We are the body of Christ here on earth. We are the ones who are told to love God with all of who we are and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are the ones tasked with bringing God's kingdom where all are fully welcome, here on earth.

And so these words in this psalm extolling God's creation, praising God's majesty, are also words that call us, the church, the body of Christ, to action.

"All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your faithful shall bless you. They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom, tell of your power to make known to all people your mighty deeds and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations."

Now, my friends, as followers of Jesus, we long for the day when God's kingdom will be fully established here on earth, and in fact, in just a little while, we will pray together with languages from across this world for that very thing. Thy will be done, thy kingdom come, on earth. We know, we know that in order for this beautiful kingdom where glory reigns eternal, in order for this beautiful place where all are gathered in, in order for that to come to pass, we, we are the ones who are to be at work.

Jesus said, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Pray therefore to the Lord of the harvest to send workers into the harvest field." Who do you think Jesus meant? Us! We are the workers meant to do God's will and establish God's beloved, eternal, never-ending kingdom here on earth.

It's not to be some far-off thing, it's not supposed to be something we only see when we die, because God created this world and called it not just good, but very good. God created this world so that people may have abundant life here and now.

The fact that that abundant life is out of reach for millions across this planet is not God's design. No. That is our work. And because that is our work, because that is the way we divide this beautiful planet, because of the way we decide who gets what, because that has been our work, because we are the ones who have put these systems and structures into place, that press so many down while lifting just a few up, because that is what we have done for generations, it is also our work to undo that.

"Is not this the fast I choose," the prophet Isaiah speaks in God's voice. "Is not this the fast I choose, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to break every yoke?" That is meant to be here and now, on this earth, in this world, in our very flesh and bone.

It's not a heavenly prize, it is an earthly promise.

And so the words of the rest of this psalm call us as followers of Jesus Christ, call us as bearers of the divine image, call us as breathers of the Spirit that empowers and sends us out; the words of this psalm tell us what it is we are to do.

"The Lord is faithful in all God's words, gracious in all God's deeds. The Lord upholds all who are falling, raises up all who are bowed down."

Well, let's apply this. The followers of the Lord, you, me, the body of Christ, we are faithful in all our words and gracious in all our deeds. The body of Christ, the followers of Jesus uphold all who are falling and raise up all who are bowed down.

Can we say that? Can we say that with truth in our hearts? Can we say that and know in our bones that to the best of our ability, with our every breath, that we have been committed to this?

Not many of us, and I include myself in that. Not many of us can say that.

For we turn on the news or walk out into our streets and we see the evidence of people who have fallen down, and who society and the church have turned away from. We see evidence each and every day of people who have been pushed aside as if they are worth less, and never invited back "in." Never given space to live and thrive as God intends.

Our health crisis, the global pandemic we find ourselves in, is just the most recent case in point. Hundreds of thousands have died, for lack of access to

appropriate medical care, for lack of access to appropriate protection for those who have sought to offer care. People in communities and neighborhoods here in the United States have died because their neighborhood hospitals are under-equipped, because they live in poorer areas. Areas where Black, Indigenous, People of Color live. That don't have the same funding as the shiny, metropolitan hospitals.

The current crisis we find ourselves in tells us, shows us, that we cannot claim the words of this psalm as true in the body of Christ. We have not upheld those who are falling, we have not raised up those who are bowed down, we have not handed out food to all who are hungry. Instead, we hold it back. We pretend that some are more worthy than others, even though God never, never intended that in creation.

What would it look like if we, as the church, took these words in this psalm as a challenge? Took these words in this psalm as a clear picture of who we are called to be as followers of Jesus Christ in the world today. What if we took this psalm and paired it with the parables from Matthew 25 to help us understand what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves, as people who love our Almighty God with all of our heart and soul and mind and strength.

This psalm is called a Psalm of Praise but I offer it to you today as a call to action. Yes, it is praise for who God is, how God interacts with us and God's beautiful creation, it is praise of what God intends this world to be, but for us, followers of Jesus Christ, it is a call to action. We are the ones being called out in this psalm to put our hands to the plow, to put our feet on the ground, to follow where Jesus has led. We are being called out to be faithful, in tangible ways, to be faithful in ways that begin to change the world.

In our Matthew 25 foci, to build congregational vitality, dismantle structural racism, and eradicate systemic poverty, don't you hear the words of the psalm calling out that this is what our good God intends? Don't you hear in the words of this psalm that God's kingdom is a place where all have enough, where all are fed, all have clean water to drink, all have appropriate clothing to wear, all have access to healthcare and education, all are welcome. No one is a stranger, no one is imprisoned, no one is forgotten or marginalized or pressed down.

My friends, this is indeed a matter of life and death. For our neighbors who have already died from COVID-19, and for those who fear this illness because they know that death is the most likely outcome, what does it mean for us to be gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love?

My friends, this is a matter of life and death because we have heard the names, we have said them ourselves, of those who have died because God's kingdom is not fully established here on this earth, and all people are not raised up. No, instead too many of our siblings are pressed down literally, with knees on their necks and in their backs.

We know this is a matter of life and death for the millions who are food insecure here in the United States as well as around the world.

If we are to be faithful, if we are to live into the image of God that is stamped on the very center of who we are, if we are to indeed be followers of Jesus Christ, living into his great commission to teach people to obey all he has commanded us, if these are the things we long for, then this psalm calls us to put our actions behind our words, to put our money where our mouth is, to not be silent anymore.

As followers of Jesus Christ, this is who we are supposed to be. Just in all our ways, kind in all our doings, near to all who call out, and fulfilling the desires for life, full life, abundant life, freedom, full freedom with no strings attached, and joy, joy, peace, hope, for all. This is who we are called to be. By God's grace, may we be courageous. May we be called out.

Amen.