

God's Faithful Love

Psalm 136

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

November 19, 2023

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You have heard me quote 13th century mystic and theologian Meister Eckhart before, "If the only prayer you ever say in your entire life is thank you, it will be enough."

Of course, the idea of gratitude was not original to Meister Eckhart. But we hear it throughout the psalms.

Give thanks.

It is not only the invitation of today's psalm. It is the invitation of many psalms.

Psalm 7 reads, "I will give to the Lord the thanks due to his righteousness, and sing praise to the name of the Lord, the Most High" (7:17, NRSV).

Psalm 86 says, "I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever" (86:12, NRSV).

Psalm 100 begins, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth," (100:1, NRSV) and continues saying, "Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name" (100:4, NRSV).

Gratitude is woven throughout the psalms. And not just the psalms. There are pictures of gratitude throughout scripture including Mary's own song in the Gospel of Luke and the story of the grateful leper. Gratitude, it seems, *is* an important part of being human.

But today we chose a psalm that makes us wrestle with gratitude a bit.

I don't know if you really paid attention to that.

Especially because we read it responsively, many of us may have quit really listening to the lines that Sally read. We might have been too focused on our own refrain of, "for his steadfast love endures forever" that we didn't even notice the examples that were given, the evidence of God's love.

But this is a psalm that has a little questionable content. After all, in the middle section, verses 10 through 22, there is this recitation of history, of the ways that the people understood God to keep showing up for them. And, while we would affirm this activity - thanking God for being part of our daily lives - this psalm gives us pause to wonder what we should be grateful for and what God's role in our lives is.

After all, do you remember the content?

In this psalm the people are thanking God for their escape from Egypt. Ok, we might say - of course they were grateful for their lives and for their freedom. But their escape happened by the death of many of their enemies. How do we feel about thanking God for killing our enemies?

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In this psalm the people are thanking God for giving them a new land, a place to settle. Again, we might say ok. We get that. Then we realize that the land they took wasn't empty, but was gained through war and death and the claiming of *their* rights over the rights of others.

This *is* a psalm whose content we must wrestle with. We must wrestle with it as we continue to learn to confront our own history as a nation, claiming for ourselves land that was already inhabited, enslaving other humans in order that we might benefit, choosing to live as if we believe that God is our own side.

This is a psalm whose content we must wrestle with. We must wrestle with it as we pray for peace and for healing in a land that has been called holy by so many different people even as people die fighting over it.

So, how do we wrestle with this? What conclusions do we come to?

See, the reality is that it would have been easier - and would have been a shorter scripture reading - had we chosen to only read select verses today. Had we read verses 1 through 9 and then picked back up at verse 23, we could have sat comfortably with this psalm. We could have affirmed God's goodness and God's love. We could have affirmed God's attention to all of creation and to the intimacy of our daily lives. And we could have done so in a non-partisan way. We could have skipped all these verses that sound like God takes sides.

But, our Bible includes the whole psalm. So, what do we do?

Well, let me make a few suggestions.

First, there are parts of scripture that we simply need to wrestle with. So we begin by giving ourselves permission to do that...to wrestle...to wonder...to question.

And then we also give ourselves permission to remember the difference between people of that time and people of our time. The reality is that the worldview was different. The ancient people lived in a time when they understood that the gods - and yes, remember, even those who only worshiped one God, had an understanding of the existence of many gods - so they understood that the gods were in control of all things. We aren't smarter than they were. We just have different insights and different experiences and a different worldview much of which has come from what we have learned from science. So, while they might have understood that wars were won because a god chose a winner or because the gods were in battle with each other, we understand that strategy and allies and financial and physical resources and sometimes just dumb luck contribute to the results of military campaigns.

Also, as we wrestle with this reading, we want to remember that this was not recorded as a history lesson. What do we know about the psalms? They are worship materials. These are poetry and prayers and songs for the corporate worship of the people. And different ones were written with different occasions in mind. So, we need to read these as poetry, as artistic expressions...not as little t truth, facts, about what happened.

And we can think about this in our own lives. While we work to align our worship materials with our understanding of God, the reality is that sometimes even we sing things that are outside of our theology. Sometimes understandings have changed as we have aged, whether that be because of a maturing theology that comes with time or because our collective understanding has changed, and

yet often a song from childhood still evokes deep emotions even when we disagree with some of the content it contains.

I suspect some of you still find yourself wondering why we didn't just pick an easy passage of scripture...why we didn't just let Thanksgiving Sunday be a day of easy gratitude without wrestling with big ideas. And I get that. But, I also believe that these are important conversations to have. Maybe mostly because we don't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Even though we might want to reject the understanding that God takes sides, we don't want to lose the essence of what this psalm is about.

This is a psalm of thanksgiving to a God who is always present. This is a psalm of the gathered people celebrating the idea of God's faithful presence with them.

And I wonder, as we remember that this is worship material, not unlikely a song, I wonder what other verses might have been added over the years.

In just a few minutes we are going to sing our communion hymn and many of you will notice that it is made up of new words to an old familiar tune. And this is not the first time we have done this. Sometimes it is because we simply can no longer sing what we used to sing - we have changed, our understandings have changed. Sometimes it is because we have lived longer and experienced more and there is simply more story to tell.

Today's psalm may only be a verse or two - it certainly doesn't tell the whole story of the Judeo-Christian tradition. What other verses would you add? What stories would you tell of God's faithfulness?

Give thanks to God, for God is good. God's steadfast love endures forever.  
God has been with us through joy and through sadness. God has remained faithful even when life has been hard.

Give thanks to God, for God is good. God's steadfast love endures forever.  
God has opened wide the doors of welcome. God has set another chair at the table. God has enlarged our hearts so that we have learned to love people we might not previously have known.

Give thanks to God, for God is good. God's steadfast love endures forever.

Friends, there are details to wrestle with in this psalm - isn't that true in so many places in our lives? But at the heart of Psalm 136 is gratitude for the faithfulness of our God.

So, what verses would you write? What story of God's faithful love would you tell?

Maybe one from the past comes to mind - give thanks.

And maybe, if we cultivate our capacity for gratitude, if we pause and look around, if we pay attention to the ways that we are surprised and delighted each day, maybe just maybe we will find a new verse to sing as we give thanks for God's faithful love. May it be so.