

8TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, August 6, 2017
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, Honolulu, HI

THE LESSONS (Proper 18)

Isaiah 55:1-5

Psalms 145:8-9,14-21

Romans 9:1-5

Matthew 14:13-21

THE SERMON: "Praise Is Cheap...?"

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God, and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Introduction

In a Readers Digest feature, "Life in the United States," there was a supposedly true story of a family that was sitting down at the dinner table for their evening meal. One of the girls complained because they were having leftovers. Her dad was not happy with her and told her that she needed to be more thankful for what she had. To help her understand this, he asked her to say grace and that her prayer should show her appreciation for what she had. So she bowed her head and then prayed: "Thank you, God, for this food... again." Reading this reminded me of something Thomas Merton wrote in his book, "Praying the Psalms." He asked, "Do we know what it means to praise? To adore? To give glory? Praise is cheap, today. Everything is praised. Soap, beer, toothpaste, clothing, mouthwash, movie stars, all the latest gadgets which are supposed to make life more comfortable—everything is constantly being "praised". Praise is now so overdone that everybody is sick of it, and since everything is 'praised' with the official hollow enthusiasm of the radio announcer, it turns out in the end that nothing is praised. Praise has become empty. Nobody really wants to use it." Thinking about that reminded me of a recent meeting I went to and almost every speaker referred to various people and the program as "amazing." I think the speakers were all sincere but, when they said that everyone and everything was "amazing," I found myself smirking and rolling my eyes because, to me, all of that "amazing" stuff didn't seem so amazing. Praise had become cheapened, just as that little girl's table grace was cheapened because she found it hard to be thankful.

Psalms 145:8-9, 14-21

As I've told you many times, these last five chapters in the book of Psalms are "praise" psalms to help people to remember that, with all of the laments and complaints and petitions and prayers in the Psalms, in the end, we should truly praise our Lord God. Scholars think Psalm 145 is a teaching psalm because each verse begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet ("aleph, beth, gimmel..."). But a curious thing is that one letter is missing which leads scholars to wonder if there is a "lost" verse somewhere. But, I think that maybe it's to make us know that any human attempt to explain who God is will be incomplete. But, at any rate, this whole psalm clearly praises the Lord God. Even if we didn't sing all the verses this morning, what we did sing would have been praising God if we sang it as a prayer. Listen again, this is what the psalmist is saying what the Lord God is like, "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made... The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down..."

You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing. The Lord is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings. The Lord is near to all who call on him... He fulfills the desire of all who fear him... The Lord watches over all who love him..." Because the psalmist really believes that God is like that, he ends his song with, "My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever." Was our singing of the psalm this morning an expression of our love and reverence and praise of God or was it what Merton called "cheap praise?"

Isaiah 55:1-5

I think that's what Isaiah is trying to tell the Exiles who had probably allowed their worship to be cheapened because it might have seemed they were just going through the motions after 70 years in bondage so he asks, "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" Isaiah probably could be speaking to Americans today. Why do we spend our money for things which don't satisfy? Why do we continue to act like the hamster running on that stupid wheel - get up, go to work, come home, watch TV, go to bed, get up, go to work...? Is that all there is? Running in place in the treadmill of life? Isaiah tells Israel, "Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good... so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant... because of the Lord your God... for he has glorified you." God, has glorified us? I'm sure the Exiles asked that same question. They were in Exile; they were poor; they were struggling. How could God glorify them? Well, God couldn't if they kept on doing what didn't satisfy, didn't fulfill them. As the Alcoholic Anonymous program says, "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result." The Exiles were insane; Americans caught in the hamster wheel are insane. Christians who go to church just to go to church are insane. What did the Exiles have to do to get a different result? They believed that, when God released them from bondage, they could reclaim the Promised Land and make it a land of promise. What will Americans have to do to get a different result? They could really make America great by reclaiming the American dream so they can really dream again. And, instead of just going to church to go to church is insane; God wants us to go to church to hear Him speak to us and to act accordingly.

Matthew 14:13-21

Well, reading the gospel, are we supposed to perform miracles and feed the millions of people in the world who are hungry? Are we supposed to shelter the refugees and the homeless? Are we supposed to be peacemakers in the Mideast? Are we supposed to stop global warming by living green? What are Christians supposed to do? It should be all of the above. But, it's too much for me. I'm not Jesus. I can't feed five thousand people with two loaves of bread and five fish? But, I am like Jesus. Why did Jesus do what he did? Matthew tells us, "When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them..." When we hear about the hungry or the refugees or the homeless or whatever, when we hear about all this "crud" in the world, what do we feel? Do we feel compassion? Or are most people like me and feel helpless and powerless so I do nothing. Christians aren't helpless or powerless; like Jesus we have God. So, we see the world differently. We see the hopelessness in the world as possibilities. Christians are like that little boy walking on the seashore with his grandfather and see all those starfish washed up on the beach. The boy picks one up and throws it into the ocean and the grandfather asks, "What difference did that make?" and the boy answers, "It made a difference to that one starfish." Like the grandfather, the disciples only saw the crowd and told Jesus, "This is a deserted place... send the crowds away so that they may go... buy food for themselves." But, Jesus responds, "... you give them something to eat." That's pretty much

what Jesus is telling Christians today, "... you give them something to eat," "... you find shelter for the homeless," "... you find a way to help the refugees," "... you go out and make a difference... even if it's saving one stranded starfish..."

Romans 9:1-5

In our lesson from Romans, Paul had compassion for his brothers, the Jews. As he wrote, "They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises..." Well, the Holy Spirit has called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified the whole Christian Church to make a difference in this world. If just coming and sitting and singing some hymns and reading some prayers makes a difference, then great! I think that the church could do more to make a difference. In his 1965 primer on group development, Bruce Tuckman wrote that for an organization to really grow, it must learn to face up to challenges, tackle problems, plan and find solutions, and deliver results. Prince of Peace grew when it did that. We were too small to throw all the "starfish" back so worked with other ministries because we saw the challenges. Instead of asking what we could do, we tackled the problems and acted. We helped Wounded Warriors with Chaplain Jensen, foster teens with Hui Ho'omalulu, homeless teens in Waikiki with Youth Outreach, the hungry with "One Pot, One Hope" and Angel Network, and much more. Because we acted, we grew. Paul's church in Rome grew because he cared about the poor and powerless. He wrote, "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart," and we know it wasn't for just the Jews but it was for anyone who felt lost and afraid. Compassion and concern for others is why the church exists.

The Call and the Challenge

But, recently, in our Parish Council meetings, Prince of Peace seems to be more concerned about paying off our mortgage and what we need to do to get a new pastor instead of seeing our mission in Waikiki. We know God blessed us when we had a vision of mission; in fact, one of us said that God blessed us when we thought of others instead of ourselves. Oh, I know that paying off the mortgage and putting a pastoral profile are important but is it more important than "why" God planted Prince of Peace in Waikiki? "Why" does Prince of Peace exist? Is our Mission Statement just a bunch of catchy words? Do we really "reach, preach, and teach" the love of Christ? What are we focused on now as a congregation? Is it serving and reaching out to others or is it to take care of ourselves and pay off the mortgage? Jesus saw the hungry multitude and had compassion. Who do we have compassion for? Why is Prince of Peace in Waikiki? Is it just to hold church services on Sunday? Is that our "why?" Is it to "pat ourselves on the back" for what we've done? What is our "why?" When we were back in the hotel, our "why" was to find ways to serve God by serving others, has our "why" changed?