

SOUL FOOD: *The Psalms*

“God of the Humble

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Central United Methodist Church

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(Psa 113 NRSV) Praise the LORD! Praise, O servants of the LORD; praise the name of the LORD. {2} Blessed be the name of the LORD from this time on and forevermore. {3} From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the LORD is to be praised. {4} The LORD is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens. {5} Who is like the LORD our God, who is seated on high, {6} who looks far down on the heavens and the earth? {7} He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, {8} to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people. {9} He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the LORD!

WHO WOULD HAVE GUESSED?

C.S. Lewis once said, *“The best thing about Christianity is that no one could have guessed it.”* Jesus, the son of God, was born in a stable. He was a King who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey on the day that was to be his triumph. He was our Savior but we hung him on a cross. It’s incredibly odd that God allowed things to happen this way.

The story continued through others who decided that God’s way through Christ was best. The Apostle Paul left a life of status and position to become *“A prisoner for the Lord.”*¹ Because of faith, Paul humbled himself and became a servant. He put it this way in Romans 12:3, *For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.*²

Paul reminds all those who would follow Jesus that it is not about power or position but rather about faith in Christ who died a criminal’s death,

¹Ephesians 4:1, NRSV.

²Romans 12:3, NRSV.

convicted by the religious authorities of the time and killed by a Roman form of execution.

Who could have guessed that so many would choose a life such as this? Albert Schweitzer could have practiced medicine in the world's most prestigious hospitals or taught in any university instead he chose to practice his faith in the jungles of Africa. Mother Teresa could have sequestered herself in a convent but instead chose to live among the sick of India. Countless millions have followed and will continue to follow in Jesus' humble footsteps and in doing so continue the greatest movement the world has ever known. Who could have guessed it?

Not many of us are an Albert Schweitzer, a Mother Teresa or an Apostle like Paul. Even in saying that I have elevated them to a position they would not accept. For they humbled themselves in service to the greatest King the world has ever know. Even though their names are inscribed in the annals of history, they remind each of us that we have a similar choice.

GOD'S LOVE IS THE KINDEST

The Psalmist confirms what Jesus proclaimed and practiced. God's love is the kindest. It is a love that reaches out and ***“raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap.”***³ The ash heap was the gathering place of the poor. The sun would come out during the day and warm the ashes and they warm the poor at night. Nobody wanted to go to the ash heap. It was like sleeping in a modern day garbage dump. But God visits rejected people. Since the Psalm probably comes from a time after the exile when the people were trying to rebuild their city, it was a reminder that God would come into the destruction and the discouragement of their lives with encouragement.

³Psalm 113:7, NRSV.

The love and grace of God stoops to our level through Jesus Christ. God is a God who cares about us and is willing to die on a cross for his children. There can be no greater love than the love God has for us. What must we do to open ourselves to God's perfecting love?

EMPTY YOURSELF

A man visited a rabbi seeking spiritual enlightenment. Before they began their discussion, the Rabbi poured the seeker a cup of coffee. He proceeded to fill the seeker's cup, letting the coffee overflow into the saucer and eventually dripping all over the seeker's hands. *"What are you doing?"* asked the shocked seeker. *"Teaching you a lesson,"* replied the Rabbi. *"You come seeking spiritual guidance, but your life is already full of many things. How can I pour more into an already full cup? You must empty yourself of other things if you really desire spiritual things."*⁴

We come to church saying, *"Fill my Cup, Lord, fill it up."* But the best we can do is pour a little out so we can get enough in to survive the week. We want spiritual things but there is not enough room.

We are busy people with busy schedules. Our life is full of plans and things to do, projects, problems and possibilities. We try to cram a little faith into the chaos but the best we can manage is one hour a week and a quick prayer at a stop sign.

Christ emptied himself of his deity so that he might become fully human. We must empty ourselves of our humanity—of all those worldly things that fill us up—in order that we might make contact with the Divine.

Brennan Manning tells a story in his book, *The Wisdom of Tenderness*, about an American Marine in World War II who was badly wounded on

⁴Source Unknown.

the island of Saipan. He was bleeding to death. A Navy Corpsman rushed to his aid. A Navy corpsman rushed to his aid. At the risk of his own life, the corpsman played the good Samaritan, pouring oil and wine on the wounds of his bleeding brother.

It would be an understatement to report that the Marine was neither grateful nor gracious. He demanded to know what had taken the corpsman so long to get to him. When the battle was subsided, the regimental commander, who had watched the scene from the safety of a bunker, approached the corpsman and said, ***“Kid, I wouldn’t have done that for a million dollars!”***

The corpsman’s glorious answer: ***“Neither would I.”***

He had learned his lesson well. Maybe he didn’t know that what he was doing for the unknown soldier, he was doing for Jesus Christ. What matters is that he had emptied himself in such a way that he was able to set aside all concern for himself to be there for another person.⁵

It is a wonderful example of the challenge before us. Can we empty ourselves enough so that we can be filled with the spirit of Christ? Can we be filled to the point that it shines forth in everything we do?

HUMBLE YOURSELF

The Psalmist suggests that it is possible when we humble ourselves. To be humble is not what we think. The word comes from the root **humus**. It means ***“down to earth.”*** There are times when we all need to be brought out of the clouds and back down to earth. I was ruffling through some of my sermon files this week and came across something a child must have done during worship many years ago. It says,

Thank You

⁵Brennan Manning, *The Wisdom of Tenderness: What Happens When God’s Fierce Mercy Transforms Our lives* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 2002), 78-79.

I know you're going to be a good preacher.

Now that can be taken several different ways—you're NOT a good preacher yet but maybe you will be someday or I hope you get better soon. There's nothing like the words of a child to humble a person or a preacher!

It's an old story but still and good one—a preacher and his wife were on their way home after church. The preacher was somewhat puffed up after delivering what he thought was a great sermon: *“Tell me, dear”* the preacher inquired, *“how many truly great preachers do you think there are today?”*

“I don't know,” she replied, *“but I am quite sure it is one less than you think.”*⁶

Mark Twain had it right when he said, *“The moment a person seems to have achieved real humility it is destroyed by the pride of having accomplished it.”* Humility is not a natural thing. It is a gift of grace. Humbleness is God's willingness to go to the low places. God's love goes to the *“ash heap”* and *“gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children.”* Humbleness is a gift of the spirit like faith, compassion and generosity.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer captures the paradox of active humility in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*. He writes:

Our activity must be visible, but never be done for the sake of making it visible. “Let your light so shine before [others]” . . . and yet: Take care that you hide it!

. . . That which is visible must also be hidden. The awareness on which Jesus insists is intended to prevent us from reflecting on

⁶Source Unknown.

*our extraordinary position. We have to take heed that we do not take heed of our own righteousness. Otherwise the “extraordinary” which we achieve will not be that which comes from following Christ, but that which springs from our own will and desire.*⁷

We must remember that God is revealed in our humility. As Peter Marshall once said, *“Lord, when we are wrong, make us willing to change and when we are right, might us easy to live with.”* Humility Lord, teach us how to pour it out that we may have more of you in everything we do.

GOD’S NAME IS THE GREATEST

The Psalmist begins the Psalm by reminding us that we need to praise the Lord in everything we do. We praise the Lord when we empty ourselves and allow him in. We praise the Lord in our humbleness. This makes sense because praise is something that is other directed. C.S. Lewis called praise, *“Inner health made audible.”* Healthy Christians praise God in all things.

Have you ever entered a concert hall—maybe our sanctuary before one of our choir’s fabulous concerts with orchestra—and listened to the members of the orchestra tune their instruments? The sound is discordant, not melodic. The tuning, though, is simply a prelude to what will come.

C.S. Lewis suggested that how it is with our devotional practices and our worship. Sometimes they sound discordant, but God hears our prayers and praises with fatherly delight. He knows we are preparing for participation in the glorious symphony of heaven.

⁷Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York, NY: Touchstone Books, Simon and Schuster, 1995), 157.

When it comes to worship we need to get the ME out and get the praise of God back in. Early Christians didn't say to one another; let's throw up a building on the town square where we can hold services on Sunday morning at 11 am so we can get refueled for the week. On the contrary, these were men and women who had already experienced the life saving and grace filled power of Jesus Christ. During the week, they were out in the world transforming other people's lives and bringing the grace of Christ to a desperate world. What they had experienced in Christ was projected into their communities—to their neighbors and friends. Then they came together in olive groves and homes to offer praise to the God who had given them the Gospel.

Sunday morning is much more than a place where we gather with our moral notepads to receive our ethical—do this don't do that—assignment for the week. The church is called to be bold and to risk more than just a set of rules. We are called to announce the coming of God's kingdom to the world. We are to be a countercultural place where all people: the poor, the sick, the lame, the addicted, the poor and the wretched of the earth are received as royalty. We are a place where all things are made new and lives are changed forever. Our worship is more than a sign of God's coming Kingdom. It is a manifestation of its presence with us here and now. We need to be constantly praising God for his faithfulness in our lives and for the transformation he brings to others through us.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, we praise you. We praise you for the wonders of the world which you have created—the wonders of the seasons, the breeze across the lake, the roaring of the waves at the sea, the quiet majesty of the mountains, the simple joy of an afternoon in the yard.

We praise you most of all for the gift of your Son, Jesus the Christ. He came to us, embodying your glory before us. When we did not know how to find you, he chose us to be his disciples. When we did not know

how to admit our sin, he forgave us. When we felt alone and afraid, he adopted us as children. When we could not make our way back to God, he redeemed us, making his way toward us.

Make us to praise you in all of life's circumstances. Praise you here in our beloved church in our hymns and songs of praise. Praise you tomorrow at work at the office in the way we try to do what is good and right. Praise you around the family dinner table in the words we speak to one another. Praise you in good times and bad, in sickness and in health, in life, and even in death.

Praise you, O God and Creator of us all, Redeemer and Sustainer of our lives. Amen.