

Sermon for Zion, October 25, 2020

Hymns: 65 – All people that on earth do dwell; 420 – Praise, I Will Praise You, Lord;
Be Unto Your Name; 653 – Fill all my life, O Lord, my God

Scripture: Psalm 100; Colossians 3:16-17

Sermon Title: The 16 Signs Pt. 6 – Signs of Faith: Gratitude, Joy, Activity, Outreach

Psalm 100 (Responsive)

Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.

*Worship the Lord with gladness;
come before him with joyful songs.*

Know that the Lord is God.

*It is he who made us, and we are his;
we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.*

*Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise;
give thanks to him and praise his name.*

*For the Lord is good and his love endures forever;
his faithfulness continues through all generations.*

Colossians 3:16-17

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and counsel one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Amen.

My official title is “Minister of Word and Sacrament and Teaching Elder.” And I certainly lean heavily towards the “teaching” end of that spectrum. As I retell Bible stories, as I put the Bible into its historical and cultural context and build bridges to our own experience of life, my basic philosophy is, “The more you know about the Bible, the more relevant to you it will be. The more you know about your faith, the more central a role it will play in your life. The more you know about God, the more aware you will be of the place of God in your life, and of your place in God’s plan. The more you know about Jesus, and hear about Jesus and learn about Jesus, the more you will be inclined and inspired to follow him as Saviour and Lord.”

And so, for me, Sunday mornings are a teaching opportunity: that through learning, we will be challenged, inspired, and assured in our faith. In choosing hymns, I work with Faye to reflect the overall theme of the service, as well as sing those hymns which people know and enjoy. In writing prayers, I try to reflect our place before God, our need of forgiveness, our need to be consciously thankful, and our desire to pray for

the needs of others. Much else that goes on in the service is intended to make people feel comfortable, at ease; to make sure everyone knows what's going on and why, and has an enjoyable time while doing so. We call it a "Worship Service." But I ask myself: how much of our attention and energy is directed towards God?

The comments I get following a service are reflective of this. In terms of positive comments, I may hear, "I really enjoyed that service," or, "I loved those hymns (or that music or those anthems) today," or, "I really learned something this morning." Negative comments – and yes, there are negative comments - reflect that same theme: "I didn't much enjoy that service," or, "I didn't care for those hymns today," or, "I didn't get much out of the service this morning." Those are the inevitable categories of comments; after all, that's how our services are run. What I'm not often likely to hear is, "I was very conscious of being in the presence of, and worshipping, God this morning." Or, conversely, "I didn't find myself able to worship God through the service this morning."

This is not to demean what we do. I think this is a wonderful church, filled with wonderful people, and that we're doing wonderful things; I think we're growing in grace, in faith, and in loving service, despite Covid. I'm just being challenged by the thought that in the list of things that are going on any given Sunday, I'm not giving enough priority to worship. Pastor, teacher and Bible translator Eugene Peterson said, "The most important thing a minister does is stand in the pulpit every Sunday and say, 'Let us worship God.'" I need to be reminded of that.

And Paul remind us of that very thing, in our passage today: "*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and counsel one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*" That's a pretty good definition of worship. The way Paul sees it, our worship as well as our service to God and others is to be an outgrowth of our gratitude and love for God. And that is quite a reversal to the way many of us approach worship.

Many of us approach our Sunday worship – our singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs - with an emphasis on us, not on God. We think about whether or not to sing based upon whether or not we feel like singing, or if this is a song we happen to like to sing, or a style we enjoy, or an old favourite or God forbid something new, or whether we feel we have a voice that's good enough to sing with, or, nowadays, whether we get to sit where we like or whether it's worth bothering with a mask. But that's not worship. Worship is singing to God, worship is giving God praise, because

God is worthy of - deserves - our worship, because of who God is, and because of all that God has done on our behalf.

Psalm 100 – one of the great Psalms, one of the great hymns, one of the great passages of all the Bible – 2600 years old and counting – provides us the template for worship. Earlier, we read it responsively. Let's take a closer look:

Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.

- Worship is to be a joyful proclamation, and all are welcomed and encouraged to join

Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.

- Singing joyfully and enthusiastically is a central component of worship

Know that the Lord is God.

- Worship focuses on God. Realise that God is present in our worship!

It is he who made us, and we are his;

- God is our creator; we belong not to ourselves, but to God!

we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

- God has gathered us as a family; God guides, cares for and protects us.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise;

- Gather in gratitude for worship in God's house

give thanks to him and praise his name.

- Worship is an opportunity for us to express our thanks to God.

For the Lord is good and his love endures forever;

- The goodness and love of God is the source of our worship.

his faithfulness continues through all generations.

- Young and old, we worship God together with all who have gone before and all who are yet to come.

All that, in a single Psalm. St. Paul, who grew up singing this Psalm from the moment he could speak, puts it this simply: ***Worship, "with gratitude in your hearts to God."*** If we are grateful to God, if God has done anything to be worthy of our praise (and believe me, God has), then that is why we worship. That is why we sing.

We need to evaluate a service of worship based not on what we got out of it, but upon what we put into it. When you come to worship, try to remember that you are, indeed, here to worship God. Worship is about what you can bring, in terms of attitude and participation. What we get out of it is a side-effect, not the goal. Our worship is based not upon our own need, mood or inclination, but about the gratitude that is in our heart for who God is, and for all that God has done, is doing, and will do in our lives, in

the lives of those we love, and in our world. When we truly live with grateful hearts, our worship and our lives will be filled with joy.

And that leads into the next signs: activity and outreach. And for this, we are going to talk a little theology. There is a popular misconception, fuelled by countless movies and jokes and the like, that our entrance to heaven depends upon the number of good things we've done outweighing the number of bad. If we've been more good than bad, in we go. If not, St. Peter pushes the down button on the elevator.

But as good and faithful Protestants, we don't believe that to be the case. As devoted followers of Jesus and students of the Apostle Paul, we believe – officially – that your entrance to heaven is entirely dependent not upon what you do, but upon what God has done on your behalf through the birth, the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus. It is Jesus who paves the way, Jesus who buys the ticket, Jesus who gets us into heaven. It is the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross that provides for the forgiveness of our sins, and our identification as the Children of God. It is not, thank God, the feeble collection of half-hearted good deeds or even the fine collection of brave and selfless acts of compassion which we have done. Our salvation is a gift of God. Bought by Jesus. Offered freely to us.

Paul, who is better than I am at this, put it this way: *God saved us. It wasn't because of the good things we had done. It was because of his mercy. He saved us by washing away our sins. We were born again. The Holy Spirit gave us new life. God poured out the Spirit on us freely because of what Jesus Christ our Saviour has done.* (Titus 3:5-6)

Paul also wrote: *God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.* (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Following Paul's lead, we want to do things for God, on behalf of God, on behalf of the people of God, not to be in God's good books, not so that God will reciprocate by doing things for us, not so that God won't be mad at us and send me to hell; no, we want to do things for God – kind, loving, generous, self-sacrificial things – because God loves us, has saved us, and we want to celebrate that love, and do something tangible to express our gratitude and appreciation for what God means to us. It's just a natural outgrowth of the relationship God has made possible through Jesus, and the love God has shared.

It is tempting and easy to motivate people into service through guilt. Or threats. Or begging. But what we really need to do is to wake people up to the blessing it is to respond to God and engage in service, out of the appreciation we have in our hearts for what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Not to be in God's good books, not so that God will reciprocate by doing things for us, not so that God won't be mad at us and send us to hell; no, it is because the Spirit of God is alive and active within us when we do things for God and for others – kind, loving, generous, self-sacrificial things - because God loves us, and we want to celebrate that love, and do something tangible to express our gratitude and appreciation for what God means to us.

It is in doing things for those we love that we can tangibly express our love to them. Not for what we can get out of it; but in celebration of that love. It is in doing things for God and for others, in the name of Jesus, that we can tangibly express our love for God. Not for what we can get out of God; but in celebration of that love. Because God loves you.

Let's break this down into practical steps we can take, to ensure that our worship is a sincere and heartfelt response of gratitude and respect for who God is, what God has done and is doing, and the love with which God has reached out to us:

- 1) Approach worship consistently. Make attendance at and participation in services of worship a priority. There are so many things which draw us in different directions; putting worship first in our lives puts God first in our lives.
- 2) Approach worship intentionally. Come to worship intending to participate. Approach a service determined to focus energy and thought on what is happening. Sing heartily, as though to God (and you are!); listen intently, as though listening for God (and God is speaking to you!); pray confidently, as though God is hearing your prayers (as surely God is!). Give cheerfully, in response to all God has given; treat those around you compassionately and lovingly. Remember, we are not spectators in worship, but participants.
- 3) Approach worship confessionally. The worship service always includes prayers of confession; it is a time to set your heart on the right path with God. Regard this opportunity seriously; unconfessed sin in our lives is a barrier to sincerely coming before God, in the same way we feel awkward in the presence of someone whom we have wronged in some way. Confession is an important part of our relationship with God and with others.

4) Leave worship reluctantly. There is a wonderful Jewish custom which I observe when visiting the Western (or Wailing) Wall in Jerusalem. Those coming to pray will walk very quickly and rush up to the Wall. When their prayers are concluded, they will back away from the wall, slowly, reluctantly, as though tearing themselves away. This custom speaks volumes. Come to worship prepared to enjoy your time with God and with God's people. If the service goes a few minutes long because of a special event, be thankful for the privilege of spending a few extra minutes in the presence of God.

5) Live worship holistically. Worship needs to extend beyond Sunday morning, and extend into our actions, decisions and behaviours throughout the week. If we are going to say that God is worthy of our worship, then we should believe it in our hearts, and if we believe it, it will show in our actions. Real worship changes everything we do, because it changes who we are. Worship must be in the heart, not just at the place of worship. The proof of our sincerity in worship is more evident Monday through Friday than it is on a single Sunday hour.

6) Worship wherever you are. In our current On-Line world, with the restrictions placed upon us by Covid, many are engaged in "virtual worship" in their homes. But all these same principles apply, whether you are here on Sunday or whether you are limited to your screens in your home. Approach worship consistently, intentionally, participating in song and in prayer as though you are here with us in this wonderful sanctuary, which so beautifully lends itself to an attitude of worship. It is a challenge to develop a worshipful space in your own homes; rise to the challenge, and wherever you are, together with us and all who worship God throughout our world:

Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.

Worship the Lord with gladness;

come before him with joyful songs.

Know that the Lord is God.

It is he who made us, and we are his;

we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise;

give thanks to him and praise his name.

For the Lord is good and his love endures forever;

his faithfulness continues through all generations.

Thanks be to God! Amen.