



Hymn Festival
Psalms & Reflections
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
October 7, 2018

Samantha Gonzalez-Block, Heather Ferguson, Marcia Mount Shoop, & Richard Coble

Samantha--CONFESSION

Psalm 51:1-4, 10-12

Here these words from Psalm 51:

*Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.
³For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
⁴Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you are justified in your sentence
and blameless when you pass judgment.
¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
¹¹Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.
The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.*

No Confession. When I opened up the bulletin at my good friend's Presbyterian church, I was surprised to see that there was no Prayer of Confession. Call to worship....First Hymn....and then straight to the Assurance of Forgiveness... and the Passing of the Peace... Hmm...

My curiosity got the better of me. After worship, I approached the pastor and said, "Excuse me, I have to ask, why didn't we do Confession?"

"Oh," he said with a warm smile, "Confession really brings the energy down. We want worship to be a positive experience - so we like to get straight to forgiveness."

"Huh, interesting...."

His words stayed with me. Is worship meant to be a time for us to simply feel good about ourselves? Or is worship a time for us to be real with ourselves, with one another, and with God? If we eliminate confession, are we eliminating the heart of why we are here?

Confession is a time for us to express our very need for God.

It is a time for us to stop and speak openly about our human brokenness, our selfishness, our limitations. When we confess, we sing of our collective desire for God's mercy and repair, God's cleansing and life-giving grace.

The psalmist reminds us that our sin can never be kept separate from God. Any time we sin against another, we sin against God. Any time we are cruel to another, we are cruel to God. Any time we are estranged from one another, we are estranged from God.

I wonder....if we can be real with one another.... What words capture some of things that estrange us from God? What keeps us from Christ? (People respond)

Friends, confessing who are and who we long to be should not bring the energy down - it should fill us with energy. Confession charges our faith forward, it brings us closer to one another, it connects us more deeply to Christ. (pour water) When we speak truth together, we open ourselves up to love and mercy and grace - the sort that we find in Christ - the sort that washes away our iniquities and helps us live anew. What could be more positive, more wondrous news than that?

Friends the peace of Christ be with you.

Heather--PROCLAMATION

Psalm 63:1-7

*1 O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.*

*2 So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.*

*3 Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.*

*4 So I will bless you as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.*

*5 My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips*

*6 when I think of you on my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;*

*7 for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.*

During the bombing raids of WWII, thousands of children were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and good care. But many of these children who had lost so much could not sleep at night. They feared waking up to find themselves once again homeless and without food. Nothing seemed to reassure them. Finally, someone hit upon the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night the bread reminded them, "Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow."

In their book, *Sleeping With Bread: Holding What Gives You Life*, three authors Dennis, Sheila and Matthew Linn, explore the spiritual practice of the daily examen; a simple, prayerful reflection on one's day using questions like, "For what moment today am I most grateful?" and "For what moment today am I least grateful?" Or "When did I feel God close to today?" and "When did I feel distant from God?" These reflections give way to conversation with God and over time, the daily examen forms a well-worn path made by the memory of today and the intention of tomorrow.

The psalmist knows the path to God and proclaims, "O God, you are my God," a statement of faith based on the experience of a life lived fully. A life of thirst, of hunger and of sleepless nights; of betrayal, disappointment and injustice. Yet, also a life of abundance, of praise and of resting in the sheltering shadow of God's wing. But how did the psalmist come to this way of knowing God? For me these days, the question is "how do we nurture the faith of our children, like the psalmist, so that they forge their own well-worn path to God?"

The centering words of the psalmist are meant to bring us back to "what is true." Our task is to remember and to return. This rhythm, this building of muscle memory is what prepares us for the storms and celebrations of life... to remember and return. At the center, we find the table, with bread and cup... where we gather, are nourished, replenished and reminded of all that has happened since the last time we were here. The psalmist knows where the shadow of God's wing is because the psalmist has been there before. Time and again, we are invited back until the return is as natural as one's next breath.

Both the psalm and the story of the refugee children comfort and challenge us this day. May we all sleep with bread.

Marcia--COMMUNION

Psalm 146

The Psalmist says:

- 3 Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.*
- 4 When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.*

Those entrusted with the power to govern, to be keepers of justice, to be guardians of the common good should never be mistaken for anything more than human beings with biases, blind spots, and agendas. Objectivity is a Western myth--a lie we bought into--and its facade lulled many of us into believing that our institutions were checked and balanced enough to be given our ultimate trust. Many of our siblings who have been marginalized and disadvantaged and abused by these same systems have been waiting for the rest of us to wake up, to look behind the veil.

When the veil is lifted on institutions and individuals we thought we could trust, it is hard not to despair. But in our faith tradition, lifted veils are gifts--gifts of truth. Lifted veils are opportunities--opportunities for redemption.

The Psalmist says

- 5 Happy are those...
whose hope is in the Lord their God,*

*6 who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever*

God is the one and only trustworthy source of love, justice, and care. This truth is dangerous. We can use it as a license to despise the world, to escape the world, to assume a posture of judgment toward the world. We can use it as a license to give up on the world. But that, too, would be a lie. Abusive people and abusive systems want our world to get smaller. God wants our world to get bigger.

The Psalmist says:

5 Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob...

*7 who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.*

The Lord sets the prisoners free;

8 the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.

*The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;
the Lord loves the righteous.*

*9 The Lord watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.*

This Table has room for the whole human family. This Table is big enough for all of our pain and all of our promise.

This Table is a place where truth and brokenness come together in a body willing to bear the weight of the world's failure to be trustworthy.

Come hungry for justice to this Table. Come hungry for healing. Come hungry for truth. Come hungry to re-member the Body of Christ--not just in your mind, but in your flesh and blood. Taste and see, trust and believe in a world where all are fed, where all have enough, where all are cherished and loved and healed.

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give God thanks and praise!

The Psalmist says:

1 Praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord, O my soul!

2 I will praise the Lord as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

We are called to give thanks for all that is--creation, redemption, and the mystery of the Holy Spirit's power to fill these ordinary things--bread and fruit of the vine with extraordinary, sacramental purpose.

Our Great Thanksgiving is the offering of our very lives to this Holy moment and to the sacred work of being God's people in a broken world. God is our Creator and has given us a good creation. What are you thankful for about creation? God is our Redeemer and has given us the gift of Jesus the Christ, who saves us all from ourselves. What are you thankful for about Jesus? God is our Sustainer and as very present to us as each breath we take, whose mystery comforts and challenges us. What gift of the Spirit are you thankful for today?

Our Great Thanksgiving is always punctuated by our voices joined together to re-member the words Jesus taught us to pray. Our Father...

Richard--DEDICATION

Psalm 100

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

Worship the Lord with gladness;

come into his presence with singing.

Know that the Lord is God.

It is he that made us, and we are his;[a]

we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving,

and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the Lord is good;

his steadfast love endures forever,

and his faithfulness to all generations.

Writing Sunday's Prayer: A Poem in Free Verse

Sitting down at High Five Coffee

To write a prayer of dedication

After dropping your toddler off at daycare

Where he clung to your leg and cried

Just like he did yesterday

Because you've been out of town most of the week

At an educational conference that was more bluster than educational

And he missed you,

Because he does this most days, or every other day, or every third day,

Just to remind you that he is still somehow in charge

Just to remind you that he can still make your heart sink into your stomach

Just to remind you that you are important to someone

And that someone is the one you are leaving so you can go write this prayer.

Sitting down to write this prayer,

When perhaps you're not yet feeling in the prayerful mood,

You are nonetheless struck by the Psalmist who says

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

Worship the Lord with gladness;

Come into his presence with singing.

And you wonder if the Psalmist was just having a really good day,

Like she had something specific in mind when she wrote this Song of Thanksgiving,

Like she had just eaten a really good meal,

Or a long-lost friend had just come to visit, and it made her sing.
But you keep reading, and you see that she continues, saying
Know that the Lord is God.
It is he that made us, and we are his;
We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.
And you start to wonder if it was just the sheer joy of existing,
In the presence of her creator,
On whom existence rests, on whom your existence rests,
That made this Psalmist sing.
So you start to ponder, so you reflect,
When was that last time I sang for thanksgiving?
Just for the sheer joy of being,
The thrill of breath,
The delight of feeling the earth beneath my feet,
Being held, loved, embraced by the God who is above all, and through all, and in all?
You take out your calendar,
And you look at the entries,
You sigh when you think of the week behind you,
You feel a bit of anxiety creeping into your shoulders at the week ahead,
The meetings, and goodbyes, the bills, the frustrations, the memories.
You remember that you are held in the middle of it all,
By the God whom the Psalmist declares,
Is Good.
His steadfast love endures forever.
And you realize you don't just write prayers,
You live prayers, you live in prayer,
In the joys of life, in the doldrums of life, in pains of life.
Once again you commit yourself, again, as if you could ever fall away,
From the God who was right beside you all along.
The Spirit who is inside of you.
The community that reminds you of God's presence, even when you forget.
You commit to live, and to give, and to receive,
In the abundance of the God who never leaves,
Who is closet when She feels farthest away.
And you,
Give thanks to God, bless God's name.
Amen.

Where does the Psalmist take you?
What prayer are you called to live today, or the rest of your days,
in the light of the glorious goodness of God?