

“With Thanksgiving”

Psalm 100

This has to be one of my favorite Psalms. Partly because a) it gives me permission to sing at the top of my lungs, no matter how bad my singing may be and b) it is deceptively simple with its call to praise and thanksgiving yet it is still a powerful reminder of why we do what we do as people of faith. Psalm 100 calls us to “Make a joyful noise! To worship the Lord with Gladness”, to enter into God’s presence with Thanksgiving’. Through its deceptively simple words, it reminds us that to live is to praise God and to praise God is to live.

This past week, I asked everyone how you give praise and thanksgiving to God. Many of you shared with me that each and every day you find time to connect with God, either through meditation, or taking walks around your community. These were just a few things mentioned in response to my question. But not surprisingly, the number one answer given to the Theology Tuesday question of “How do you give God thanks and praise” was through music. Someone even shared that “Often times, the familiar old hymns put into words what I am feeling in my heart and soul. The hymns remind me exactly what God has done and continues to do in my life.”

I couldn't have said it better myself! The hymns we lift to God, the very songs we lift in praise and thanksgiving are simply theology set to music, something people of faith have been doing for years...including the very Psalm we read today as our text.

Psalm 100 is and was a song to be used in worship. It is an extended call for the people to come into the presence of God. So it is not surprising that in the 16th century, this very text was set to music, using what is known in present day as "Old Hundredth" as its tune or should I say, using the tune we all know now as our doxology.

The very same doxology that we sing each and every Sunday was brought to life in the sixteenth century. It has been preserved intact throughout its entire history and is ranked by many as the head of all Protestant church music. Just think about it. Certain hymns have come and gone. Certain praise choruses have come and gone. But the one song that has remained the same is our doxology. The song we lift up in praise and thanksgiving to our God from whom all blessings flow has remained a constant in the lives and worship services of the people of God for some time now.

Just think about it. We are singing the same song as the people did back in the 16th century. We are using some of the same words that worshippers have used

with this psalm since the days of the Reformation. We are singing a psalm that connects us all the way back to the procession of believers who have been singing of their faith from the days of our Hebrew heritage. Doesn't that just boggle your mind?

Our words of thanksgiving and praise have remained unchanged year after year, constantly reminding us from whom all our blessings flow, constantly reminding us who we are and whose we are. The deceptively simple doxology that we sing each and every week has remained unchanged for generations and generations, and yet still it has the power to call us together to make a joyful noise and enter into God's presence with thanksgiving.

Because as the psalm tells us... the Lord is good, God's love is steadfast, and his faithfulness remains the same from generation to generation. That is why our doxology has remained unchanged. It captures the sense that our God has been a constant in and among the people of God since the beginning of time, the sense that God's love never fails us and never leaves us alone. Our doxology of praise and thanksgiving has remained the same because the character and the nature of the God we have all experienced has been steadfast from generation to generation.

It is a tale as old as time...the love of God surrounding the people of God and us responding in kind, with praise and thanksgiving, and yet, still, it amazes

me that these deceptively simple words of thanksgiving and praise have the power to surprise me.

Why is that? When we know, here in our minds, that the love and grace God is a constant in our lives, why are we always surprised to discover it to be true here, in our hearts? As I have lived with this text this past week, I think I have finally come up with an answer for this.

Recently, someone told me that to be grateful at all times is one of the most counter-cultural things we can do as people of faith. To be honest, at first, I thought, I'm not sure I agree with this statement. I can come up with a whole list of other things that I can do that I would consider to be more counter cultural than just offering thanks and praise to God. I could practice simple living by not buying things in excess, focusing only on my needs and truly contemplating my wants before I go out on a shopping spree.

Or I could protest and march each and every time I see and experience an injustice in this world, becoming a voice for the voiceless, no longer being silent in the face of the darkness around me.

Or I could say no to the disease of busyness that is overtaking our world and create space for Sabbath in my life, taking the time to disconnect from the rhythms of clocks and schedules and reconnect with the rhythms of God found in creation.

Then I realized the constant word I was using was, me, me, me...words that are definitely not counter-cultural. So I decided to spend a little bit more time to reflect on this. And here is what I came up with:

For us as people of faith, we know we are to be in the world but not of the world. The world operates under different values than the Kingdom of God does. Where the world praises power and money, the Kingdom of God praises peace and mercy. So when I reviewed my list of what of activities I thought would be more counter-cultural than giving thanks and praise, I realized I was responding to the world, not responding to God.

Here's why I say this: what we need to understand is that as people of faith, being Counter-cultural has never been about us or our response. It has always been and should always be who God is for all of God's children. It should always be about the work of healing and wholeness that God is already doing in our world.

In embracing the call to be counter-cultural by living out the values of the Kingdom of God, our actions and our words should always proclaim who we understand and hold our Creator. Sustainer, and provider to be. And for us as people of faith, that is not the world. Our Creator, Our Sustainer, our provider has been and will always be our God. That is what sets apart the values of the Kingdom of God and the values of the world.

If we start every conversation, every decision, every moment with it only being about us and our response to the injustices that we see, we are offering our opinions. We are offering our views on how God should be working in our world, if God would only take our advice.

But when I, when we respond to the gift of God's grace, to the gift of God's love by waking up each morning, thankful that God has given us this day to experience the blessings of God, without even asking, we are making a statement about who God is, not just for me, but for all of God's people. When I, when we respond to God's grace by saying thank you to God for the food in our pantry, because after all, it was God who made the plants to grow, the rain to fall, the sun to shine, so that we could even have such food, we are making a statement about the character and nature of God, the same character and nature that has remained the same to and for the people of God from generation to generation. When I, when we respond to God's grace by saying thank you to God for our families and friends, people who were brought into our lives, to love us, to walk beside us, to support us, and yes even to argue with us, when we can show that relationships go beyond politics or blood relations, we are making a statement about the grace of God, the love of God, that has remained a constant in the lives of the people of God since the beginning of time.

As people of faith, when we live lives of thank filled living, knowing that our lives have been so transformed by God's grace and God's love, that we will never be the same, we are making a statement about who God is, not only for ourselves, but for all of God's children. By giving thanks and praise to God first and foremost, we join the chorus of all of God's creation, recognizing who is our one creator, our one sustainer. We center ourselves in the presences of our one provider whose love is steadfast, whose faithfulness endures from generation to generation, whose very goodness fills our lives.

You see, giving Thanks and praise to our God has never been about us. It has always been about who God is. Through living lives of thankfulness and praise, we are making the most counter-cultural statement we can make. Because through our actions, through our words, we are proclaiming that this world does not have the last word but rather our God, our God who is good, our God whose love is steadfast, our God who watches over us like a shepherd, our God will always always have the last word, and that word will be a word of grace, a word of love, a word of hope, just like it has been for the people of God since the beginning of time.

I think it only fair that since I asked you how you give thanks and praise to God that I share my response to this question as well. I'll be honest, I don't know if I have ever really consciously thought about this question about thanks and praise.

They have always been something I do. If I see a beautiful sunset, I thank God. If I experience a life giving moment, I give thanks to God. Giving thanks and praise to God is just something I do, probably so much so that I take it for granted. So this past week, this Theology Tuesday question forced me to really open my eyes and make a conscious effort in giving thanks and praise to my God.

So here is how I gave thanks and praise to God this past week. On Friday, as I was walking into the school to pick Hannah up from school, most of the students were leaving for the day. One particular class and I met up in the hall, and in the front of the class line was a young boy with a large grocery bag.

This young boy held up the bag, proudly showing it to me, and said, "I've got a heavy bag." I said yes you do, and then I noticed the grocery bag contained items from the Backpack project, items such as ramen noodles, granola bars, snack size applesauce, small microwave meals, to name just a few. The bag truly was overflowing with an abundance of food. So in that moment, I gave thanks and praise to God for the hands that had filled that bag for this student so that he and his family would not go hungry this weekend.

Then later as Hannah and I walked home, my child decided that we needed to clean up the creek. So armed with gloves and plastic bags, we picked up bottles

and cans, paper and other trash. And as we were doing this, I gave thanks and praise to God for the honor of caring for God's creation.

But I have to tell you, these examples pale in comparison to another example of how I gave thanks and praise to God this week..

As many of you know, we had our church Thanksgiving Dinner this past Thursday night. Well, as we all gathering around tables, I don't know if many of you noticed, that many of the children there that night had gathered around the piano, listening to the music that was being lifted up as an offering of praise that night.

Among the children gathered around the piano, I noticed my two, another young boy connected to our church, and two faces that probably only I know of how they are connected to our church. Among the familiar faces at the piano, there were two young girls, singing with the others with smiles on their faces. These two young girls had come to the dinner with their grandmother who lives in Midway. But these young girls' connection to our church goes beyond the dinner. These two young girls are also part of our new Daisy troop.

Now, I know a little bit about their background because I help out with the troop. I know that their mother is a single mother. I also know that their father died this past year. Just a few days ago, the mother and I were talking and she explained

to me just how hard this past year has been for the family but especially for the girls. They had lost their father. They had changed houses. They had left everything familiar things behind and were starting over...and yet still I could see the light of hope, the light of love, the light of grace shining through these young girls' eyes as they gathered around the piano, simply singing together, lifting their voices, making a joyful noise unto God. They were entering into God's presence with thanksgiving.

In that moment, I gave thanks and praise to God because I finally understood just exactly how counter-cultural praise and thanksgiving can truly be. Because in that moment, through the girls' smiles, there was a reminder that the darkness does not and will not overcome the light. I was reminded of why we lift our voices in praise and thanksgiving. I was reminded why we make a joyful noise unto our God. We know that when everything seems upside down and inside out, we can always count on our God!

So as people of faith, knowing this, may we always embrace the challenge to start each day with praise and thanksgiving, and in doing so, may we make the loudest statement we can make, a statement about who our God is, not just for us, but for all of God's children so that all the world will know just how good our God really is.

Today and all days, let us make a joyful noise unto the Lord, Let us enter his presence with praise and thanksgiving because our God is good, his love is steadfast, and his faithfulness endures from generation to generation.

Thanks be to God! Amen.