

19.11.10 - “Awed by Heaven, Grounded in Earth”

Psalm 145 - Rev. Adam Hange

The Westminster Shorter Catechism asks - and please pardon the exclusively male pronouns for humans, and God - What is the chief end of man? Answer: *The chief end of man is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever!* There's some good Reformed theology to start our day off right! The chief end of humankind is to glorify and enjoy God forever. This, according to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, is our eternal “WHY!” We exist to give glory and praise to God! Whether you agree with that statement or not, I want you to hold it in mind throughout today's sermon.

As you know, I usually preach from the lectionary. Today's Gospel reading from the Lectionary, is from Luke 20. Rather than expound on the intended benefits of “Levirate Marriage” and try to explain you'll be married to if or when you get to Heaven, which is the topic of debate in the assigned reading from Luke 20, I decided, instead, to draw our attention to one of our other assigned readings from the lectionary - Psalm 145.

It's not common for me to preach from the Psalms. I tend to go to the Gospel, Hebrew Scripture Reading, or Epistles first... Rarely, do I preach on the Psalm. It requires a whole different approach. For this is an entirely different genre of scripture. This is poetry! And if there's anything people loath more than listening to other people's favorite poetry, it's listening to other people analyze other people's favorite poetry! I'm kidding, of course. I know we have some great poets, and appreciators of poetry in our congregation - and for that I'm thankful! I'm just noting that this is a different kind of text than we usually explore on a Sunday morning. Psalm 145 is almost at the end of the collection - and my Bible's editor titles it - A Psalm of Praise - praising the greatness and goodness of God.

I want to thank Kristine for reading it in its entirety, and in Spanish. Sometimes I've wanted to do that, but haven't because it would take 3 pages in our bulletin! It's a Psalm is all about glorifying God, giving praise to God. But, as

Trappist monk, and one of my inspirations, Thomas Merton, is quoted to have said, "Praise is cheap," and it seems as though these words remain true today. Eric Mathis, a classmate and colleague of mine from my days at Wheaton College, writes:

“We give homage to so many things that our praise is cheap. Is it also accurate to say that our praise to God is cheap? Or, that it has at least been cheapened? Perhaps. Sometimes we praise God by talking so much that our words become hollow. Other times, we praise God as our heavenly Santa Claus who gives gifts we want. We also treat God as a street vendor with whom we can bargain: "I'll give you praise if you will do (fill-in-the-blank)..." As the bargainer, we may even decide to keep shopping until something better comes along. Praise is cheap and at times we cheapen our praise to God. How then, do we begin to claim Psalm 145 as our own when it commits us to voice our praise to God?"

Each of us comes here today with our own list of wants and needs, hopes and desires. Each of us comes with our own unique experiences of the Holy in our lives. And each of us come with our own reasons to be thankful... and, for that matter, our own reasons to downright ungrateful! There's good science that says practicing gratitude makes us happier, and is actually healthier for us, than dwelling on our disappointments. But any number of studies and good data aren't enough to move us into that place of gratitude and thanksgiving. Despite our ability for rational thought, we live and move through this world as highly irrational creatures.

Sometimes we need a little help counting our blessings. We need a nudge - a tool or method - practice - or ritual - to prompt us to offer thanksgiving and praise. With children, we prompt little ones after receiving something, "What do you

say?” Ah yes, “Thank you!” Well, as adults we need that prompting, too! The Psalms, and especially psalms like this one, give us a holy nudge!

Some might wonder if our thanks is truly genuine if it has to be prompted - if it has to be structured or written into our daily routines. Can our thanks be truly heartfelt, if presented in a way that is in some ways, *pro forma*? Yes, I believe so! As I said, in the Children’s Message, Psalm 145 is an acrostic. I used to hate having to do those in school! I thought, they are always so “wooden” - always grasping for words, instead of finding the most natural and sensible word.

Well, one good thing I can say about acrostics is that they aim at **comprehensiveness**. In Psalm 145, we see 21 lines - one line for each of the 22 letters in the Hebrew Alphabet - with a line for the letter “nun” sandwiched in there at verse 13b in most English translations. So, all 22 letters are employed to show the completeness of this thanksgiving! The alphabetic pattern obviously forces certain constraints on the author’s choice of words and the composition of lines, but within those constraints, the composer of Psalm 145 has created a hymn with a literary structure not determined simply by the order of letters. It doesn’t just fit the recipe for an acrostic, it makes a powerful and coherent argument for why God is worthy of praise!

Mathis goes on to say:

“Psalm 145 is a robust doxological assertion: the individual, the community, and the whole creation is to praise God for God's goodness and God's greatness. We are to participate in this praise, yet we know our praise is cheap and at times cheapens God. Within this tension, this week's Psalm passages provide a glimpse of hope. They move us from generalized, hollow praise of God to recall specific and meaningful accounts of God's goodness

in our lives. They remind us of God's ongoing tenderness towards us, the weak and needy, and they remind us that God's goodness - just like God's creation - is universal in scope. We are then called to invest in and proclaim the ongoing praise of our God (our Sovereign) whose selfless giving is manifest daily in each blessing of creation.”¹

Now, you may have come today already assured of God’s goodness and greatness! Maybe you have already been counting your blessings, and the list is quite long. Or maybe you came in need of some reassurance, despite apparent evidence to the contrary, that God is indeed a God of love and care, goodness and greatness. Just saying God is good and great, will not make it feel true, but believing in faith that that is true, its is good for us to be reminded. It is good for us to remind ourselves, and one another, that God is *good* to *all* people...

*“One generation shall laud your works to another,
and shall declare your mighty acts.”*

Indeed, God is good to *all* created things...

*“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.”*

¹ Eric Mathis, “Psalm 145: WorkingPreacher.org, accessed 11/8/2019 - https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1001

It is a Psalm filled with awe, and yet it is also grounded in reality. Note the verse that says,

***The Lord watches over all who love him,
but all the wicked he will destroy.***

Even in this rhapsody of praise, there is an admission that there are consequences for our action and inaction - natural consequences to our failure to live according to our highest ideas - and God's vision for us. This is true for the individual, the community, the nation state. The witness of scripture is that goodness, and greatness, are found, not in fame, wealth, success, or power, but in living, and acting, in the ways God has shown us - ways that build up the Realm of God on earth. Part of that living, is becoming a people of gratitude!

As I said, we're now entering that season of Thanksgiving. Sometimes we give cheap praise, and cheap thanks. Sometimes we say and do things out of habit, sometimes out of duty, or obligation, without reflecting more deeply on why we should be grateful.

In this time of auto-reply messages, and direct mailings, I get more thank yous from the place where I get my oil changed, than my friends. So, don't misunderstand me, even the simplest thank you - is significant - in this day and age. But, it's an ever-present question for me - How can we show our gratitude - to God - and others - in ways that are truly meaningful?

Tomorrow is Veteran's Day and growing up, I was taught that I should show respect for the service and sacrifice of our veterans (and their families) by saying, "Thank you for your service" when ever I was a veteran. Well, I was surprised one day, when during my clinical pastoral education (CPE) experience at the Louis Stokes VA Hospital, in a Cleveland, I said that to a veteran, and he told me he wished people would just stop saying that phrase.

As he explained, he felt it had become “rote” and no longer felt genuine. I suppose, it feels a little like the Psalms Christians read on Sundays but don’t really mean, or believe. Intonation matters! He told me, if folks really cared about Veterans, they could show it by their actions. Improving wait times at the VA hospital. Making more services available for troops who return from service. Helping people get jobs. Thinking twice before sending them off to fight another war! That was just one person’s experience. But it made me wonder, what could we do to express real and true gratitude? How might we honor those to whom we are grateful, in a deeper, more thoughtful way?

For generations, our nation has made service in the military one pathway towards citizenship. I’ve only recently learned that since 2014, our country has been deporting hundreds of individuals who are not legal citizens, yet, nevertheless, are veterans - who enlisted and served our country in the military - a country to which they did not have a passport!² There is a whole community of deported U.S. military veterans living in Tijuana, Mexico.³ Some are there because they have some criminal histories - drug charges - possibly related to their trying to cope with PTSD or living with the trauma of war. There is also a large community of veterans who are living homeless, or on the edge of poverty, within our borders, for some similar reasons. There are good people who, were useful to the military for a time, yet, have not been embraced or fully cared for by society upon their return to civilian life. People who served, and now feel discarded. Saying, “Thank you for your service” is nice, but not nearly enough.

If God doesn’t want cheap praise, well, neither does anyone else. True Gratitude is about more than saying thank you. It’s about more than a few words, or a discount on services. True Thanksgiving, is always about demonstrating our gratitude in words and actions. Maybe we need to start with a writing prompt - like the Psalmist did in Psalm 145. Maybe we need a day each year to prompt us to say

²<https://www.npr.org/local/309/2019/06/21/733371297/deported-u-s-veterans-feel-abandoned-by-the-country-they-defended>

³https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2019/11/09/veterans-day-stop-deporting-veterans-make-them-citizens-column/2527994001/?fbclid=IwAR1PS57xGaBxBdaT5JzaTknZGKICHAel3n3-l_OKiRyV_kmyWwGFlwB58L4

thank you. Maybe we need a pre-printed Thank You card. Maybe that is the right place to start. Like a simple prayer of blessing is the right place to start when giving thanks to God for the abundant blessings we enjoy. But those simple prayers shouldn't be the end of our practice of gratitude. If we are truly, truly grateful, our lives will demonstrate that gratitude, and it will be self-evident.

We are blessed, and we have so much to give God thanks and praise for. May we each write our own songs of thanksgiving, our own prayers of praise. As we prepare for the rituals of giving thanks - tomorrow, and into the coming weeks, may we be reflective - prayerful - and truly grateful. And when we finally arrive at Thanksgiving, may it be so much more than going through the motions.

What is the chief end of humanity, Church? Yes, to glorify and praise God forever. And, I believe it is to become people of gratitude, and thanks - who honor one another in word, and deed.

Amen.