

First Presbyterian Church
Psalm 100, “Prepared in Worship: Thanks and Praise”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 7/16/2017

Receiving gifts is a common and enriching experience in life.

I still remember the scavenger hunt I went on as a kid on my birthday
that ended in a BMX bike on the deck.

Now, there are times when someone gives us something,
we’re able to return the favor, or we can help them out
in some other way.

But many times all you can say is, “thank you.”

I remember a time when I needed a job for just 2 months in the summer.

A friend of mine owned a catering business,
and he had a huge home with its own lake.

Jim invited me to come work for him that summer and to stay in his home.

Not only that, but my friend Mark was invited to join me
for the summer as all.

We ate his food, could soak in the Jacuzzi at night,
and were asked to drive his collection
of antique cars to work.

All Jim wanted was for us to be around
and share our lives with him for those couple months.

And all I could say was, “thank you.”

I couldn’t try to make it up to Jim, or return the favor.

That’s where we are with God all the time.

There’s nothing we can do to match the gracious gift he has given to us,
and so all we can say is, “We come with grateful hearts.”

“Thank you.”

And yet, it’s possible to become so caught up with the needs of the day,
the pressures of life, the concerns of those around us,
that we live without gratitude, without giving
the thanks and praise due to God.

That's why our worship service has elements
specifically aimed at those goals.

In our Call to Worship, our songs of praise, and in our prayers,
we take time to express our gratitude.

One song that we sing every week is a song of Praise and Thanks
that we call "the Doxology."

"Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

Even our wordless worship can be considered in the categories of
praise and thanks. The ministry of Dave Howard in his
instrumental moments

has not simply been to "fill time," but to direct our hearts
and minds toward God in thanks and praise.

It's a basic posture of Christian spirituality, and one that actually doesn't
come so naturally when the world we are shaped by most of our days
emphasizes evaluation, critique, and indifference
more frequently than appreciation,
gratitude, and attention.

Jeffrey Greenman suggests that there are four stages in worship:

- 1) recognition of God's nature and character
- 2) recognition of sin
- 3) reminders of God's grace
- 4) expressions of faith and trust

Each of these, he adds, can feature readings, prayers or songs.

In beginning to explore our worship service last week
we considered our Gathering together.

This being-present-with each other
recognizes God's communal character.

We also reflected on the passing of the Peace.

This recognizes the nature of character of what Christ has done:
the radical reconciliation (and therefore, peace)
we have with God and one-another through Christ.

Today we land in another opening element of worship:
Our giving of thanks and praise in a variety of forms.

In praising God and giving thanks we recognize that God is always
“God-for-us,” as Karl Barth put it.

One of God’s enduring characteristic’s is being is on our side
as we see displayed most clearly in Jesus.

When we recognize that truth, it’s only appropriate for us to express
thanks and praise for who God really is,
as opposed to living in fear of the “God-against-us” caricatures
that get floated around so often.

Psalm 100 is a prayer that helps us to do that.

This psalm has a title: “A psalm. For giving grateful praise.”
It’s the only Psalm that has the Hebrew word for “thanksgiving”
in the title...here translated “grateful.”

When I was a kid I said “thank you” to my mom a lot.
Food, drinks, rides, everything was, “Thanks mom.”
It became a kind of mindless reaction...just, “thanks mom.”
Sometimes that’s what it can be with God, too.
“Hey, thanks God.”

Well, I suppose we all have worse habits.
But the problem with perfunctory responses is that they
leave us with the feeling that nothing is new here,
nothing requires my attention,
I’ve been here and seen this before.
Much more than a perfunctory, “Thanks, God,”
is required for worship to be a transformative factor in our lives.

And so it’s nice for me to know that there’s a Psalm that’s made
just for this purpose.
Because even though we may want to say more than,
“Thank you,” to God, sometimes we don’t quite
know how to put that into words.

When we pray using the Psalms, they expand our vocabulary
and give us deeper and more rich ways of praying.
The result is that instead of, “Thanks God,”
we can call on everything and everyone around us
to “shout for joy,”
to “enter his gates with thanksgiving”
and to “worship the LORD with gladness”
for “he is good and his love endures forever.”

This is thanks that reminds, refreshes, and opens up our imaginations
to see and engage the world around us differently.

Now I’m going to walk us through several images of God in this Psalm
that remind us of why we come before him with grateful hearts:

First, we come before Yahweh, the Creator of all.

In verse 1 all the earth is invited to worship Yahweh,
and in v. 3 the psalmist reminds us that “it is he who made us.”

The beauty of the world around us is something that often draws us into
thankfulness. But the psalmist suggests we call the world into
worship of the Creator.

There’s no handbook on how to do this,
but it seems to me that in cultivating backyard gardens and flowerbeds,
we do this very thing.

We should also remember
those who grow the food that comes to our plates,
and those who set aside vast wilderness areas
for preservation.

It may not be an explicit intention,
but when we act with love, care, and good intention
toward the created world, I believe we call forth praise
that is a fragrant offering in the throne room of God.

A second image is the King we come before (v. 2).

The phrase, “come before him,” is a prelude to later images
of walking through the palace gates and entering into the royal courts.

Kingly imagery isn't common in our world, but if you're praying the psalms,
you have the opportunity not only to say the words of the psalm,
but share the prayerful imagination of people
who worshipped thousands of years before you!

John Witvliet is quoted in Jeffrey Greenman's book
"Pedagogy of Praise," (available next week!) saying that
"When we sing 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow,'
we are also saying
'Down with the gods
from whom no blessings flow.'"

In this same way, despite all the corrupt
and abusive kings and political figures we know about,
Yahweh is the good and just king who provides
for the people rather than exploiting them.
When we praise God for being a good and just king,
we are also saying,
'Down with all the power brokers who destroy
and corrupt.'

This imagery is saying that our God is the good ruler
who is worthy of thanks and praise.

**In verse 3 the psalmist shifts to the image Shepherd,
for we are "the sheep of his pasture."**

So much of our world focuses on production, accomplishment,
proving our worth, and demonstrating our ever expanding capacity.
What a gift it would be to just be a sheep!
I remember as a middle-schooler dreading
all the homework and social pressure that I faced at school.
I would look over at my stupid beagle, Maggie, and think,
"She's got the life. Sleeping all day,
chasing toys, and rolling in cow manure."

Well look, in giving God thanks and praise we're invited to simply
be the sheep of the Shepherd.

Sometimes that's what we need, and in truth,
no matter how hard we work, our production won't rise much more
than a sheep's in the grand scheme of things.

So go on, give God thanks and praise like a good sheep!

**Taken all together, God is our Creator, King, and Shepherd,
and the one who invites us in.**

We aren't intruding. We aren't taking up
time better devoted to some other pressing issue.
We are most welcome here, before the one who is full of grace.

When we know that this is who God is,
it keeps bitterness from growing inside of us.

It's pretty easy for bitterness to begin.
You know in Hebrews chapter 12 it says,
"See to it that no one misses the grace of God
and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble."

Bitterness comes because we think
we should have gotten something more than we actually received.
But having a grateful heart comes
from an awareness that God has already given us
everything we need,
even if we don't have very much.

Who knows, maybe we've been given so much
that we'll be able to give to others as well.

It is my prayer that God will open our eyes to see his hand at work,
so that we can say with full honesty,
"We come with grateful hearts," each day of our lives.

CONCLUSION: Litany of Thanksgiving

God's love is everlasting.

Come, let us praise God joyfully.

Let us come to God with thanksgiving.

For the good world; for things great and small, beautiful and awesome; for seen and unseen splendors;

We thank you, Lord.

For human life; for talking and moving and thinking together; for common hopes and hardships shared from birth until our dying;

We thank you, Lord.

For work to do and strength to work; for the fellowship of labor; for exchanges of good humor and encouragement;

We thank you, Lord.

For family; for living together and eating together; for connections with those who are near and far;

We thank you, Lord.

For singleness; for joy, freedom, and opportunity; for friendships and connections with others; for wholeness in Christ;

We thank you, Lord.

For marriage; for the mystery and joy of flesh made one; for mutual forgiveness and burdens shared; for secrets kept in love;

We thank you, Lord.

For the young; for their high hopes; for their irreverence toward worn-out values; for their search for freedom; for their solemn vows;

We thank you, Lord.

For growing up and growing old; for wisdom deepened by experience; for rest in leisure; for continued work and service; and for time made precious by its passing;

We thank you, Lord.

For...[call out what you are thankful for] **We thank you, Lord.**