

May 24, 2020

Psalm 100

The Easter season is coming to a close. Next Sunday is already Pentecost. Our worship focus this Easter season has been on the things we are experiencing and learning in our “entombment”, our self-quarantining in the midst of this pandemic AND the things we hope to take with us, when we, like Jesus, can leave our graves and begin to move about somewhat more freely.

So far in worship, reflecting on what we are learning in the midst of physical distancing, we were reminded of the importance of humor in these difficult times. We are discovering the importance of being together, physically, in community. We recognized the myth of self-reliance; a recognition stemming from knowing our inter-dependence on each other and all of creation. We lifted up the need to honor our elders, many of whom have been overlooked or ignored. And, last week, we named the Back-2-Basics feelings we have, as we hunkered down and re-discover some of our gifts – gardening, sewing, baking, even the gift of family.

While there are probably many other things we are learning in our confinement, the final thing we are focusing on is gratitude. I have spoken with some of you over the last two months and, after we have bemoaned our physical separation and the tragedies of the present pandemic, I regularly hear you say how grateful you are. Grateful for your health, your families, your homes, the essential workers who make living as we do possible; essentially, it seems, we are grateful for having gratitude. It does make a difference.

I have known about this gift found in the present pandemic for a while now. We purposely placed it here at the end of this sermon series, both because we should always end in and with a spirit of gratitude in our daily living AND because this is Memorial Day Weekend, when we give thanks to those who

serve or have served in the armed forces. While I despise war and believe all forms of violence goes against God’s directives for our lives, I am grateful for all who have served in our armed forces and their willingness to put their lives on the line to protect and maintain my freedom.

While one of the purposes of Memorial Day is to honor those, who sacrificed their lives to protect our country, it was also a day set aside to remember the horrors of war in the hopes that we would “study war no more” (to quote scripture). I cannot imagine the fear and anxiety that fills a soldier who has to face combat. I do know, however, the anxiety and fear that fills many of us, when wars come home to us in the form of our children, our loved ones, or our friends caught up in the violence of war, either as soldiers or civilians.

I believe the fear and anxiety that too often touches us in the midst of this pandemic is very similar to the fear and anxiety created by war. We are, after all, faced with a deadly enemy that we cannot even see; we fear not only for ourselves, but also for our elders, our children, our friends, ourselves. For some people this fear and anxiety paralyzes them, keeps them entombed.

The people of the Bible knew all about fear and anxiety. Life can be very fear inducing. They are often threatened, persecuted, killed. In the face of these distressing and stress-filled times, according to the Bible, they regularly reminded themselves of God’s steadfast love and gave God thanks for steadfast presence and love. The Bible is infused with a spirit of gratitude.

When we find ourselves in difficulty, we often begin to pray, automatically. “God, get me out of this ...!” “God, help me.” While it is important to name our difficulties, our fears, while it is important to pray for others, I have heard from several, very spiritually-wise people, the only prayer we should ever

pray is “Thank you.” On today’s bulletin cover is Meister Eckhart’s famous quote: If the only prayer your ever pray is Thank You it will be enough. Thank you? The only prayer? What about my sick mother? Or my friend dealing with loss?

Prayer, especially intercessory prayer (praying for others), is important, not because your prayers will change the work of the Holy One, but because they change you and your relationship to those you are praying for. Thank you, when prayed sincerely, prayed from a grateful, grace-filled heart, changes you, profoundly, more than any other prayer, which is why it is probably the only prayer you need to pray.

Having a spirit of gratitude is very important now as we struggle in this time of shelter-in-place and even more so as we prepare to leave our entombment and begin to face the new realities the pandemic has created. Gratitude is important, because how we see the world directs how we live in the world. Seeing the world through a lens of fear and anxiety keeps us blind to the good that is also around us. It fills us with negativity and leads to a kind of defeatism. When we are able to see the blessings we have, even in hard times, we feel renewed energy and even enthusiasm, we are more likely to see life in positive terms, which, in turn, lightens the darkness of depression and the work we have to do.

Like everything else in life, though, gratitude needs to be nurtured, if we want to grow and strengthen it in ourselves. Many years ago I was taught to put together a gratitude list. No matter how deep and dark the hole you are in is, unless you are dead, there is always something to be grateful for – I am still breathing. Maybe the sun is out. If all you have is two things, begin with that. You will be surprised that, upon waking up the next morning, you will have at least one more thing to be grateful for – you woke up.

In these shelter-in-place times and as I look forward to following Jesus out of my entombment one of the gifts I am taking with me is a renewed sense of gratitude. And here is just a partial list of what I am grateful for:

- each one of you, even though I cannot be with you physically at the moment I know of your steadfast love
- my family – here in Rhode Island and around the world
- a home, food on my table, friends, employment
- a country that has helped make me who I am
- the armed forces personnel, who have risked, and are risking, their lives to protect my freedoms

My gratitude list is too large to be contained in this sermon. You get the idea, though.

So, whether you find yourself still entombed, fearful of stepping out, or whether you are chomping at the bit to leave the shelter-in-place tomb you feel trapped in, I pray you are preparing to follow Jesus, wherever you are at. I pray too that you will take with you the things you are learning in these days:

- laughter
- a renewed commitment to community
- a knowing that you are not in this alone
- an awareness of and concern for our elders
- a desire to continue to practice your re-discovered gifts
- making a God-centered gratitude the center of your life

Friends, I hope you will take to heart and put into practice these learnings. I pray, too, you will each day, in the words of the psalmist, make a joyful noise to the Lord – to God, the Holy One, who is Life and Love, because God is good, all-generous in love, loyal always and ever.

Thank you, God! Amen.