

The Passion of the Psalms: Praise

June 8, 2008

Year A: Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Camp Norwesca; near Chadron, Nebraska
Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

People are always sending me wonderful stuff especially from the internet. Some of it is really good, and even my corny jokes – many of them – come from you, so keep sending the stuff. If it fits I'll use it. Recently, I received some items about the great things that children say in church. Here a few:

A mother took her three-year-old daughter to church for the first time. The church lights were lowered, and then the choir came down the aisle, carrying lighted candles. All was quiet until the little one started to sing in a loud voice, "Happy Birthday to you, happy birthday to you . . ." ¹

Or there is this one: After a church service on Sunday morning, a young boy suddenly announced to his mother, "Mom, I've decided to become a minister when I grow up."

"That's OK with us, but what made you decide that?"

"Well," said the little boy, "I'll have to go to church on Sunday anyway, and I figure it will be more fun to stand up and yell than to sit and listen." ²

And finally, a father took his five-year-old son to several baseball games where *The Star-Spangled Banner* was sung before the start of each game. Then the father and son attended a church on a Sunday shortly before the Fourth of July. The congregation sang, *The Star-Spangled Banner*, and after everyone sat down, the little boy suddenly yelled out, "PLAY BALL!!!" ³

One thing I have found with children is that they know the importance of joy. How often have we had a hard day at work and come home, maybe a little grouchy, our kids don't know what we've been through, but when we come home they greet us with a smile just because they are happy to see us. Or try working with you – I highly recommend – or volunteer at camp – and you will see among our young folks passion, energy, and an incredible zest for life. And I'm not talking about during game time, I've seen this passion when they worship.

I remember one night I was in charge of a District youth lock-in held at the YMCA in Beatrice. I had asked a fellow pastor to lead worship that evening. It was about 2:00 in the morning and the kids were running on lack of sleep, pop, candy, and whatever else sugar they had taken. They were geared up for worship. This pastor came in with his guitar and during that opening song they were lively, clapping their hands, praising God. But then something unexpected – something I was not prepared for – happened. The pastor I asked to lead worship stopped that first song half way through and told the kids that in worship there should not be clapping or yelling or loud singing. Well, that dampened the

¹ "Happy birthday to you." *Seth's Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations, Part II.* 41.

² "Boy be a preacher." *Ibid.*, 42.

³ "Play ball." *Ibid.*, 42.

whole mood of worship. And that was the last time I ever asked that gentleman to ever lead a youth worship service.

Today our scripture is from a Psalm that reminds us that we need passion in our life. This Psalm reminds us that praise brings meaning and purpose into our life.

For our reading today please turn to Hymn #565 (Norwesca) / #767 (sanctuary)

[Psalm 33:1-22 \(NRSV\)](#)

Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous. Praise befits the upright. ²Praise the LORD with the lyre; make melody to him with the harp of ten strings. ³Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.

⁴For the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. ⁵He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.

⁶By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth. ⁷He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle; he put the deeps in storehouses.

⁸Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. ⁹For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.

¹⁰The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. ¹¹The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations. ¹²Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.

¹³The LORD looks down from heaven; he sees all humankind. ¹⁴From where he sits enthroned he watches all the inhabitants of the earth -- ¹⁵he who fashions the hearts of them all, and observes all their deeds. ¹⁶A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. ¹⁷The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save.

¹⁸Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, ¹⁹to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine.

²⁰Our soul waits for the LORD; he is our help and shield. ²¹Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name. ²²Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we hope in you.

Folks, we are a church that has adopted the five New Testament purposes that Paul outlines for the early Christian church: worship, fellowship, mission, discipleship, and evangelism. We worship on Sunday mornings. We fellowship through our Family Nite on Wednesdays and we've just touched on mission through our Mission & Service Fair. As you can tell we are in a work-in-progress. But this is the goal established by the leadership of this congregation, to be a purpose driven church with purpose driven Christians.

Some of you may recognize this five-fold purpose language. Rick Warren in his *Purpose Driven Life* and *Purpose Driven Church* books says that these purposes are essential for the people of God. In his writings he says that our first purpose in life is to worship – more importantly it is to give God pleasure.

“Bringing enjoyment to God, living for his pleasure, is the first purpose of your life. When you fully understand this truth, you will never again have a problem with feeling insignificant. It proves your worth. If you are *that* important to God, and {God} considers you valuable enough to keep with {God} for eternity, what greater significance could you have? You are a child of God, and you bring pleasure to God like nothing else {God} has ever created.”⁴

Now I’ll be honest with you. When I first read that paragraph I was a bit uncomfortable. I always thought that once you found your purpose meant that you would finally enjoy pleasure. Isn’t that what is taught in our culture? I’ve noticed with the Credit Crisis looming credit card commercials are really on this notion. What you see is buy it now and you can enjoy life now, oh and then pay latter. The message is find in your hidden purpose – like a big screen TV or that vacation that you need – you can have pleasure now. But that’s not what Rick Warren says, is it? Finding your purpose means giving God pleasure. And if we can stretch Warren’s words a bit to fit with our Psalm, it is more fitting to say, finding your purpose means giving God praise.

On March 23, 1743, Frederick Handel premiered his oratorio in London to an audience that included the king. As the piece progressed, everyone seemed to know they were beholding something timeless and holy. When the “Hallelujah Chorus” opened, the king was so overcome by emotion that he sprang to his feet. Out of protocol, the rest of the crowd rose too. Along with the king, everyone remained standing until the final strains of the music echoed through the hall. Ever since, whenever the chorus is performed, audiences rise. “King of kings!” sings the choir. “Lord of lords! And He shall reign forever and ever!”⁵

If you’ve ever been in a performance of the *Messiah* you can just feel those goose bumps all over your body. The music, the passion, the feeling of praise for God is just absolutely alive. What is so amazing about that performance – at least for me – is the only other time I have felt that experience is when I have attended a Nebraska football game. And I’m not talking about the game itself, I’m talking about the opening moment when the Cornhuskers walk into the stadium. I one time got their late and was so disappointed because I had missed listening to the Alan Parson’s Project of *Sirius* and looking up at that Huge Screen there at Memorial Stadium and watching those Huskers that I have followed since I was a little boy rush into the game. And it’s not just me, you can feel the energy of the crowd when that song starts and people are focused on one thing – a team, a football team, a game. And yet, that is the passion and the praise as one of our Bishop’s once called it: The Religion of Nebraska.

And because I am such a huge Nebraska fan, this is the reason I need this Psalm.

⁴ Rick Warren. *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth am I Hear For?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan. 2002). 63.

⁵ Bruce Wilkinson. “Standing for Handel’s *Messiah*.” *Seth’s, Part IV*. 39.

Haydn once composed a masterwork, taken from Scripture, called *The Creation*. One year before his death, he was just healthy enough to hear it performed. As they rolled him into the auditorium in a wheelchair, pandemonium broke out. Applause and calls of praise rained down on the great musician. It took all of Haydn's strength to pull himself to his feet, raise his hands toward heaven, and shout, "No, No! Not from me, but from *there* -- from heaven above comes all!"⁶

This is why we need to praise God, because worship is not for our benefit. Rick Warren says, "as a pastor, I receive notes that say, 'I loved the worship today. I got a lot out of it.' This is another misconception about worship. It isn't for our benefit! We worship for God's benefit. When we worship, our goal is to bring pleasure to God, not ourselves."⁷

When we praise God it reorients our mind and life a bit. Let me give you an example. When each of my daughter's was born I thought of them constantly, all the time. I told everyone about them. I shared their pictures and was even proud to show off my spit-up stains. And when I went to work, or was still in school, or when they were in day care, I thought of them constantly. That helped me stay close to them. It also helped remind me of my love for them.

When we praise, our focus is on God and nothing else – not the Nebraska game, not Chadron State, not the Cardinals or the Rockies . . . When we praise God we are thinking about God, about our love for God and we are reminded that God truly needs to be and must be central in our lives.

Some of you may be familiar with the story of Eric Liddell, a Scot born in northern China to missionary parents. When he was a teenager he was sent to a school for missionary children in Scotland. There he became known as the Flying Scotsman and had a reputation as the fastest athlete in the land. The movie, *Chariots of Fire* is based on his life.

Liddell's life is truly an example of one who knew the important of praise and that God should be and must be central in your life. If you've seen the movie you may remember the famous scene from the 1924 Paris Olympics. Liddell, a devout Christian, refused to run in the qualifying event for the 100 meter dash – his best race - because it was held on Sunday.

When he ran in the 400 meter dash as Liddell went to the starting blocks, a messenger slipped a piece of paper in his hand with a quotation from 1 Samuel 2:30, "Those who honor me I will honor." Liddell ran with that piece of paper in his hand. He not only won the race but broke the existing world record with a time of 47.6 seconds.⁸

After the Olympics he returned to China as a missionary and teacher and continued to compete. But in his competitions he stayed true to his purpose to praise God. In the movie Liddell is quoted as saying, "I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast, and when I run, I feel God's pleasure." Later he says, "To give up running would be to hold him in contempt."⁹

⁶ Bruce Wilkinson. "Praise not for composer but for God." *Ibid.*, 40.

⁷ Warren. 66.

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eric_Liddell

⁹ Warren. 75.

If you didn't know the story of Eric Liddell you would almost think he was a bit arrogant. Someone who says, "I'm good because God made me good." But that is not the story of praising God. Liddell ran because it was God's gift, his purpose, is way to teach others to follow God. It allowed Eric Liddell probably one of the fastest men in the world to be humbled before the very presence of God. And that humbleness he lived.

During World War II, the Japanese took over his mission station. In 1943 he was interned in a POW camp. Liddell became a leader at the camp and helped get it organized. Food, medicines, and other supplies ran short at the camp. There were many cliques in the camp and when some rich businessmen managed to smuggle in some eggs to the camp, Liddell shamed them into sharing them with the rest of the camp. Fellow missionaries were forming cliques, moralizing, and acting selfishly. Eric kept himself busy by helping the elderly, teaching Bible classes, arranging games and also by teaching the children science.

During the internment Liddell refereed a hockey match to stop fighting amongst the players as he was trusted not to take sides by the two teams. Liddell was also involved in preparing the food for the Japanese guards, again because he was trusted not to poison their food. One of Liddell's fellow internees later wrote a book about his experiences. He wrote stated that Liddell was "the finest Christian gentleman it has been my pleasure to meet. In all the time in the camp, I never heard him say a bad word about anybody." Later, Winston Churchill approved a prisoner exchange and Liddell, as a famous athlete, was one of the prisoners chosen to go; however Liddell, unsurprisingly, gave his place to a pregnant woman.

Liddell died in that camp on February 21, 1945, just five months before liberation. A fellow internee, Langdon Gilkey, was later to write, "The entire camp, especially its youth, was stunned for days, so great was the vacuum that Eric's death had left."

Fifty-six years after the 1924 Paris Olympics, Scotsman Allan Wells won the 100 meter dash at the 1980 Moscow Olympics. When asked after the victory if he had run the race for Harold Abrahams, the last 100 meter Olympic winner from Britain (in 1924), Wells quietly replied, "No, this one was for Eric Liddell."¹⁰

Folks, when we praise, we replace our needs with what God wants for you, for me, and for the world. Praise does not mean that life gets any easier. Praise does not mean that we can thank God that everything works out our way. Praise does not mean that we get to feel better or that God will bless us any more. When we praise we make the world better. When we praise we become better people because God is now central in our life.

Judy Hoff in her book, *Psalms from the Heartland* interprets this Psalm in this way:

We often use your creation to describe our life, O God.
We talk of the difficult times as valleys and mountains.
People have a mountain
Of overwhelming problems and pain in their life.

¹⁰ Wikipedia.

They cry out that they cannot make the climb;
They need help.
I ask you, "Please, God, take away this valley in my life."
But you, God, don't make the valley less wide or less deep.
Instead, you walk beside me and comfort me.
I walk on in faith and in trust.
Friends and family come to lighten the load.
They give me hope.
Have you noticed the change,
Defined or subtle,
In people who have climbed a mountain
Or walked a valley?
Some draw closer to their God.
Maybe they take a deeper appreciation
Of family and friends.
Perhaps they have courage and power
To us the gifts God had already given them.
You did not promise, creator God,
That life would be a smooth, level plain.
Instead, you promised always to be with us.
All my thanks to you, the source of true mercy.¹¹
Let us praise God and focus on nothing else. Amen.

¹¹ Judy F. Hoff. *Psalms from the Heartland*. (self published. 1999.)