

Searched by the Psalms Series at Brentwood

January 17, 2009

God's Unfailing Love

**Ps 36:5-10 & Luke 4:22-30
(Hymns – 691, 19, 698, 694)**

I had a hard time writing a sermon this week.
Like so many others, I was left numb
by the disaster in Haiti.
The theme for this Sunday is God's unfailing love
and where can that be seen in the events of this week?
What is there to be said in the face of such a tragedy?

The numbness eventually lessened.
It was gradually,
though not completely,
replaced by gratitude for the compassion
that is flowing towards
the poorest country in the Western hemisphere.

The compassion takes many forms –
money, presence, courage,
creativity, community,
food, medicine, shelter,
and countless other essentials.

Each individual who has responded with compassion
has his or her own motivations for doing so.
For many, including those of us gathered for worship here this morning,
that motivation arises from their Christian faith.
The blessings they enjoy are gifts from God meant to be shared.
They see themselves connected at the very core of their beings
to God and to others.

When they prayer for those who suffer and grieve,
when they feed the hungry,
care for the sick and wounded,
even give a simple drink to the thirsty,
they do it to God.

They do it in the power of God's Holy Spirit.
They do it as a way of living to the full in Jesus Christ.

The hymn we sang at the end of our congregational hymn sing this morning helped to put things in perspective.

[The text of the hymn is at the end of this sermon]

It was written by the Rev. Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, who co-pastors Limestone Presbyterian Church in Wilmington, PA, with her husband, Bruce.

It was distributed this week through a number of networks, included the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, through which I got it.

"I wrote this hymn," Winfrey Gillette wrote, "as a way of providing a prayer that could be sung in worship, so people could express their sadness and grief at this disaster, as well as their faith in God and a commitment to serve God in the midst of tragedy."

The link to our text this morning, vss 5-10 of Psalm 36, is the third verse of the hymn:

*O God, you love your children; you hear each lifted prayer!
May all who suffer in that land know you are present there.
In moments of compassion shown, in simple acts of grace,
May those in pain find healing balm, and know your love's embrace.*

It's the embrace of God's love that forms the focus for this section of Psalm 36.

Vss 1-4 and 11-12

deal with those who think they can live separated and apart from God's steadfast and persistent love.

Their lives become mired in pride and evil.

Their arrogance in thinking they can go it alone has dire consequences for them and those around them.

Vss 5-10 witnesses to a stark contrast between them and those who know they walk with the Lord and know they have been embraced by the Lord's love.

They speak of the richness of life lived in relationship with the God who is the true fountain of life in all its abundance.

That is the *chesed* spoken of in this Psalm and dozens of other places in the Hebrew Testament.

The nearest parallel in the Christian Testament is the Greek word *charis*, translated *grace*.

It is a love unique to God.

Humans can receive, reflect, and share this love,
but it's origin is from God alone.

We experience it in its fullness
only in relationship to Jesus Christ and his people,
in the community of a congregation of Christians.

I ran across an interesting reflection on this topic this week
in Barack Obama's *The Audacity of Hope*.

He has an entire chapter on his faith
and how it developed over the course of his life.
His mother had the greatest early influence on it.

She honoured and respected religious beliefs.
She practiced kindness, charity, and love more than most.
She had an abiding sense of wonder
and reverence for life.

But she, like many in our neighbourhood here at Brentwood,
saw so-called "organized religion" and "religious institutions"
dressing up closed-mindedness in the garb of piety
and cruelty and oppression in the cloak of righteousness.
She did not see the church as a necessary part of her spirituality.
It was a barrier rather than a means
to the freedom in faith that she sought to practice.

And we have to admit,
as I have discovered over and over again
in my research as a church historian,
that she was right about many congregations
and many manifestations of Christianity.
I think that kind of Christianity is a distortion of God's intention,
but it happens all too often
in this treasure we have in human vessels.

Obama's lesson in the value of community to his faith
came in the slums of Chicago,
while he was a community organizer there.
The lesson came from the black churches
in which the people with whom he was working
gathered in community with God and each other
to cope with joblessness, drugs, and hopelessness.

Here's how Obama describes his realization
that the community of a congregation
is an essential part of a flourishing faith:

*... my experiences in Chicago also forced me
to confront a dilemma that my mother never full resolved*

*in her own life: the fact that I had no community
or shared traditions in which to ground my most deeply held beliefs.
The Christians with whom I worked recognized themselves in me;
they say that I knew their Book and shared their values
and sang their songs.
But they sensed that a part of me remained removed,
detached, an observer among them.
I came to realize that without a vessel for my beliefs,
without an unequivocal commitment
to a particular community of faith,
I would be consigned at some level to always remain apart,
free in the way that my mother was free,
but also alone in the same ways she was ultimately alone.*

I was moved and enlightened by the way Obama framed his realization that community matters. We explored this at our Bible study this past Friday as well. The stronger the sense we have that this community among ourselves, God, and others matters in facing the tragedies and possibilities of life, the more sincere and powerful our invitations to join us will be.

Life is not meant to be lived in isolation and loneliness. It is meant to be lived in community with God and others. That is what churches, at their best, help happen. That is the way God seeks to use communities like ours. And we are invited to help God make such community real.

Another writer that I read years ago came to mind this week as well. Victor Frankel was an Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist of Jewish birth who survived the Holocaust.

In *Man's Search for Meaning*, originally entitled *Saying Yes to Life in Spite of Everything*, he told of his life in the concentration camps, how he lost his wife and parents, and how he found resilience in remaining focused on the meaning he could find in simple acts of kindness. Ultimately, it was the meaning and power of love that kept him sane in the midst of that insanity.

The truth[is] that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love. I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. In a position of utter desolation, when man cannot express himself in positive action,

when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way – an honorable way – in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment. For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words, "The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory...." (56-57)

The infinite glory the angels contemplate
is the *chesed* or steadfast love of God
praised in those middle verses of Psalm 36.
It is a love that is focused on a chosen people
who have gathered in worship,
much like us.

It is a people, over the generations,
that experienced natural and human disasters
of overwhelming proportions,
much like us.

And God's invitation to them was to be a blessing to all people,
to all animals, and to the earth itself
by living proactively under the wings of God's love
in spite of what was happening around them,
much like us.

During weeks like this,
when we are numbed by the suffering around us,
it is good to be reminded
of the unique quality of God's love
that gives us the resilience to continue to be God's people,
strengthened by and reaching out with
the love we have seen most clearly in Jesus Christ.

As the final verse in Carolyn Winfrey Gillette's hymn says:

*Where are you in the anguish? Lord, may we hear anew
That anywhere your world cries out, you're there-- and suffering, too.
And may we see, in others' pain, the cross we're called to bear;
Send out your church in Jesus' name to pray, to serve, to share.*

In Haiti, There is Anguish

ST. CHRISTOPHER 7.6.8.6.8.6.8.6 (“Beneath the Cross of Jesus”)

In Haiti, there is anguish that seems too much to bear;
A land so used to sorrow now knows even more despair.
From city streets, the cries of grief rise up to hills above;
In all the sorrow, pain and death, where are you, God of love?

A woman sifts through rubble, a man has lost his home,
A hungry, orphaned toddler sobs, for she is now alone.
Where are you, Lord, when thousands die—the rich, the poorest poor?
Were you the very first to cry for all that is no more?

O God, you love your children; you hear each lifted prayer!
May all who suffer in that land know you are present there.
In moments of compassion shown, in simple acts of grace,
May those in pain find healing balm, and know your love’s embrace.

Where are you in the anguish? Lord, may we hear anew
That anywhere your world cries out, you’re there-- and suffering, too.
And may we see, in others’ pain, the cross we’re called to bear;
Send out your church in Jesus’ name to pray, to serve, to share.

Tune: Frederick Charles Maker, 1881

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