

Searched by the Psalms

Psalm 14 & Luke 15:1-10
(Hymns – 445, 347, 644, 642)

The Value of Honouring God

I plan to preach this morning
on what this Psalm does not talk about.
It's a strange way of approaching a Biblical text, I admit,
but I think this Psalm warrants it.
In a sense, I will be preaching between the lines of the Psalm,
talking about the positive values
that underlie all the negative condemnations in the text.

What I have noticed in my pastoral coaching over the years
is that negativity in human beings
usually arises from two things:
a value being violated or a need not being met.

Indeed, a popular writer on psychology, Cherie Carter-Scott,
has coined the word *negaholics*
to describe people stuck in their negativity.

A negaholic is one who is victimized by inner forces that are waging a war of self-negation with attitudes, thoughts, words, or behavior. These forces are keeping you trapped in a private dungeon with graffiti all over the walls that say: "You can't be it. You can't do it. You can't have it. So forget it!"

Christians, especially in North America,
tend to get stuck in their own version of negativity - sinfulness.
It's the same dynamic.
We *deem* ourselves to be sinners, always doing things wrong.
We are nothing but worms, worthy only of rejection.
But the real Gospel message
is that we are God's beloved children and friends,
restored to what God created us to be in Jesus Christ.
God in Jesus Christ, through the workings of the Holy Spirit,
re-deems us to be flourishing human beings,
created in the image of God, to be with God, and empowered to be a blessing.
That is what Christians are freed to be and do
through Jesus Christ.
It is God who frees, not we ourselves on our own,
but the result is endless potential for positive possibilities in human beings.

So, what I want to do this morning is look behind the negatives in this Psalm to the positives that are absent from most of it.

On first reading, it is unrelentingly negative.
It is a condemnation of the wickedness and foolishness
that arise from ignoring God
and the toll that *that* attitude takes
on the quality of human life as God wants it lived.

The Hebrew word *nabal*,
which most English versions of the Bible translate as *fool*,
also has the connotation of being impious and immoderate,
someone who ignores the reality of God's presence
and is out of control in their self-absorption.

Remember, the Psalms were used in communal worship,
in the gatherings where the people of God
came together to praise and pray and ponder.

When hearing and/or reading this Psalm together,
they, as we did this morning, would have heard
that they all have it wrong,
they are all equally bad,
none of them got it right,
not a single one.

That's a pretty strong blanket condemnation.
Is it really deserved and fair?

I think it is.
There are times in the lives of all of us
when we ignore the existence of God,
sometimes intentionally, often unintentionally.
When that happens,
our senses of direction are thrown off.
We lose our bearings.
We become lost.
Fear comes to dominate our lives.
And fear does strange things to us.
It distorts our sight, our feelings, our thinking, our behaviour.
It distorts the ways we deem or see the world.
We become self-absorbed and protective in a very defensive manner.
We cut ourselves off from others in the false hope
that we can take care of ourselves.
And the most important person we cut ourselves off from is God.
That's how we get stuck in negativity,
get mired in a sense of sinfulness and negativity.

One of the distorted ways human beings
express this sinfulness and negativity
is through what psychologist Jonathan Haidt calls “the myth of pure evil.”
We avoid responsibility for our part in sin
by projecting its cause onto others,
especially those who are different and who can be deemed as threats.

I’m afraid we are in the midst of an epidemic of that kind of thinking
as we remember 9/11 in the United States.
I find all of the attention paid to this Florida pastor and his small flock
that want to burn Korans troubling to the point of disgust.
Obama’s plea for tolerance and mutual understanding has my full support.

This is an example of human beings setting themselves up to be God.
They assume for themselves the right to judge
who is right and who is wrong.
Psalm 14 is very clear on this point.
The only judge is God.
The Psalm is a prayer to the one and only Judge,
but it never presumes to take over his authority and power.
It’s filled with passionate, angry pleas
rooted in bad experiences.
But the authors and pray-ers never assume the role of judge.
In fact, they recognize that they too are the judged.
But they know they are being judged and corrected
by a loving God who will be true to his covenant
of mutual love and blessing.
What this God requires, in the mind of the Psalmist,
is obedience to the covenant.
As the prophet Micah said,
this God we worship requires that we do what is just,
show constant love in this God’s name,
and live in humble fellowship with him.

In Jesus Christ, through the continuing work of the Holy Spirit,
those of us who acknowledge God with every breath we take
can delight with gratitude
in being able to offer this kind of obedience.
That is the kind of obedience Christ nourishes in us,
an obedience to a loving God that leads us to flourish
in the service of that God’s kingdom of peace and well-being for all.

So, those who try to read into this Psalm
permission to judge others, to divide the world into good guys and bad guys,
really miss the point.

This Psalm is a reminder
of the value and importance of keeping the covenant,
of maintaining a close and nourishing relationship with a loving and just God
in order to be a blessing to the whole of creation.
That is the way we participate in God's *re-deeming* of the world.
With God's guidance through the work of the Holy Spirit,
we see things, *deem* things, through the mind of Christ.
We are disturbed by injustice that arises from negativity and fear.
We see other human beings as beloved friends and children of God.
We offer our best gifts and talents in the service of God's love
to bring about a change in attitudes and behaviours
that generates a peace and well-being
that allows us all to flourish together.

The prosperity of Israel,
and by extension, of God's new covenant people, the church,
lies in their continuing practices of blessing.
Our prosperity lies in our loving God with our whole beings
and our neighbours as ourselves.
And in today's global village,
our neighbours are every other human being on this planet,
as well as the planet itself.

May Jesus Christ nourish us to go and make this so.

Written and preached by the Rev. Dr. Brian Fraser
Minister with Brentwood Presbyterian Church
Burnaby, BC
www.brentwoodpc.ca

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