

241013 Thanksgiving to a God of love and Grace

Psalm 100

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

2 Worship the Lord with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.

3 Know that the Lord is God.
It is he that made us, and we are his;[a]
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

4 Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.

5 For the Lord is good;
his steadfast love endures for ever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

For the last week or so, my wife Charleen has been posting pictures to social media of things that bring her joy in her day. You know, a picture of the huge maple tree down the street in full colour. A picture of Tobias and I playing a board game. A picture of Mattea hanging out with some friends. She's been enjoying looking for those things and posting them. It helps her pay attention to things that are important and she says it also feels like she's spreading some joy on social media. But on our walk on Wednesday, she wondered aloud whether this was just frivolous. In a world where there are so many problems, is this just an escapism technique that allows her to avoid the issues? She can't handle the news and so she just posts lovely pictures of joy? Is this

just part of her white privilege, a thing that white women can do to avoid dealing with the realities of an unjust world?

This morning I want to reframe that question in terms of Thanksgiving. In a world with so many issues and problems, how do we give thanks? When there is so much suffering in the world; when Gaza suffers under indiscriminate bombing; when our society is filled with mental health issues, drug addictions, and pervasive loneliness; when homelessness is rising and food insecurity is growing; when our society is so polarized and our political and even religious discourse makes it more so - what does it mean to give thanks?

There is, I think, a danger in thanksgiving. Giving thanks can go in two directions. It can say two very different things about God. It can ignore the problems in the world and celebrate the status quo. It can give thanks to a God who upholds the current structures and maintains the contemporary power dynamics. It can support a prosperity Gospel where we believe that if we are good life will be good. A belief that faith in God leads to material success, physical well-being, and happiness. That God wants believers to be richly blessed in this life and that physical well-being and material riches are always the result of faithful living. We give thanks to God for what we clearly deserve. And God is a God who blesses the good. In our society that stresses

independence and the belief that you can do anything if you just put your mind and effort into it, it becomes easy to believe in our own autonomy and our own self sufficiency. That our prosperity is the result of our own abilities. We give thanks to God for what we deserve. And God is a God who upholds what is.

But...what about my cousin with mental health struggles? My father in law who died young? Those struggling with food insecurity because food has become so expensive? I wonder if we need to take a different direction with our thanksgiving. Or maybe understand God differently in our Thanksgiving.

If we understand God as a God who is at work in a world that needs saving, among people who need saving, perhaps that shifts the tenor of our Thanksgiving. If God is a God that is working redemption in a world needing redemption, then our gratitude holds a different meaning.

The God of the prosperity Gospel does show up in the Old Testament. A classic example is the book of Job, where the dominant presumption is that Job's prosperity was the result of his righteousness and the disasters that befall him must be the result of some great sin. And a God who supports the status quo shows up in some of the psalms, especially the royal psalms and in a few other places.

But the overarching Biblical understanding of God is of a God who saves. A God of grace and mercy who longs to release us from evil even when we don't deserve it. A God who longs for healing and peace for the whole world. A God who very much changes the status quo and names that what is is not what should be. In the Old Testament we have a God who frees the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. A liberating God for a people who seem to consistently rebel and go against God's desires. They aren't rewarded for their wonderful ethics or even their consistent faith in God. They are saved despite their rebellion. God is a God of Salvation. But God's desire for shalom, for a just peace, where everyone has enough, extends beyond the people of Israel. One of my favourite books of the Old Testament is the book of Jonah. Jonah the reluctant prophet. The...understandably reluctant prophet. Jonah isn't tasked with words for his own Hebrew people. No. Jonah is sent to the enemy. To Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian Empire. The center of the power that would destroy the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Jonah is sent to the evil empire because of God's hope to bring change and salvation even there.

In the New Testament, God's love and grace and mercy result in the stunning decision to come and dwell among us in human form. God so wants relationship with us; so desires good for us; so wants healing in our relationships with each other and

with God that Jesus came. Jesus, who avoided palaces and ate with the poor, the lame, and the outcasts. Who taught that there was blessing in being poor, in being a peacemaker, in being meek, even in being persecuted. Jesus, who called people to repent, to change their direction and to focus their lives on God and God's intentions for the world.

And Jesus, who in some mysterious way brings forgiveness and reconciliation with God for each one of us through his life, death on the cross and resurrection from the dead. The cross and resurrection that says that the world needs saving and constantly challenges the status quo. The cross that names that all is not right with the world. The resurrection that promises new life even through the pain and grief that are inevitably part of life.

As we've been moving through a sermon series on forgiveness, I've been conscious of the fact that our Christian faith is rooted in a God of forgiveness. A God whose love and mercy overflows with the desire to bring reconciliation. A God who takes seriously the brokenness of the world and longs to bring healing despite our human resistance. As we've seen, forgiveness doesn't mean that evil is ignored; that sin is excused; that the pain caused is okay. But it does mean that healing is possible, and that reconciliation is possible. Our text from First Timothy is Paul giving thanks to God for the love and grace shown to him, for

being a God of forgiveness. A God who offers mercy to Paul despite the evils he committed. Who offers grace to Paul even though he didn't deserve it. He writes: "I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy...and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus." That is Paul. Giving thanks for who God is and how God has acted in his life. That is God, offering love and grace and mercy to each one of us. Offering love and mercy and grace to **you**.

My favourite New Testament story is probably the story of the prodigal son and I love what it says about who God is. I love the image of the father waiting to welcome his son home even before he could apologize. A father waiting to forgive and to reconcile if only his son would return. A God waiting to forgive and reconcile if only we would return. God calls us into repentance - a change of direction. The world is **not** what God intends for it. It needs changes of direction. But God is also **always** offering us grace filled forgiveness. Thanks be to God.

If this is the God we give thanks to - a God that names that what is, is not what could be and that works for redemption - then our thanksgiving shifts character. Then our gratitude is not simply

a calcified upholding of the status quo. Instead it becomes a way of releasing us from self sufficiency. When we give thanks to this God, it is an inherent reminder that we are not alone and that we rely on a saving God. It becomes a witness. It is saying that God continues to be active in the world. Not only has God done great things in the past but God continues to work in the world now and will continue to work in the future. Giving thanks to God is a testimony to hope in the God who is ultimately in control. And then it calls us into the work, with God, of transforming our world.

Many of the psalms of Thanksgiving witness to who God is. They can be exuberant in their praise and thanksgiving while emphasizing the character of God and God's place in the world. The thanksgiving grows out of this awareness. Like psalm 100: "Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the LORD is good and his love endures for ever; his faithfulness continues through all generations." Thanksgiving because we belong to God, because God is faithful, because God is good and God's love endures forever.

So today I want to give thanks. Yes, for beauty and for family and friends and for abundant harvest and for times when relationships are good. All of this roots me beyond myself. But I also want to give thanks for who God is in the world and in my life. A God of grace and love and mercy who witnesses to what's wrong in the world and chooses to be here anyway. A God who calls me beloved while also deeply loving my enemy. A God who saves. A God who forgives. A God who brings resurrection hope even in times of pain. For who you are God, I give thanks.
AMEN.