

Give It Up

Psalm 116

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his is the season of stewardship throughout the Presbyterian Church. Thousands of sermons are being preached this month and many of those sermons will be subtle or not-so-subtle attempts to get you to 'give it up.' In fact, the most blunt approach to stewardship I ever heard was when a pastor said, "You've got money. We want it." Give it up. Many of you live with that kind of extortion Monday through Saturday. There are demands for you to give up those things that are important to you for the sake of lesser things. But you know, recently the phrase 'give it up' has abandoned this kind of extortion. Now, it's what you hear after a great performance. The emcee will ask you to show your appreciation by saying, "Give it up" and you are to show your appreciation by applauding. So, you drive past the church's signboard this morning and it tells you and me to 'give it up.' What just exactly does that mean? Let us pray.

As we have gathered this morning, O Lord, there are many things that distract and many voices try to get our attention. By your Spirit, silence all voices but your own so that we may hear your good and true voice speaking to us. May we depend on your words to have the words of life and may we hear them from the Living Word, even Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Okay, it is stewardship time in the life of the church. As I was thinking about this in the past weeks, I wondered about the best way to describe stewardship. You could go to the denomination's web site and find a 13-page paper on the Theology of Stewardship. I think you would be encouraged by it. But, in a nutshell fewer than 13 pages what is stewardship? What are we doing in the life of the church during this season? Persuading you to give money and to share your resources? That's all a part of it, but, quite frankly, I think that what we are trying to do is prevent amnesia.

Psalm 116 opens with this unknown writer declaring great love for the Lord. We're supposed to do this and often we are counseled to just love and praise God for who He is. We are not supposed to praise God for what he does for us that's too focused on what we get out of God.. But the psalmist doesn't think that and I think he's right. The only way we can know who God truly is and what God's character is like is by seeing what God does and then remembering never forgetting what God does for us and in us.

So, the writer jumps in I love the Lord! Why? Because the Lord listened to him when he was in great distress. He remembers that he was in dire straits and near death. One of the things, therefore, that we must remember is who and where we were before God intervened in our lives. This guy was in desperate need of rescue. He says that the snares of death encompassed him and that the pangs of Sheol laid hold of him. It almost seems an understatement for him to say that he is in distress and anguish.

Sheol, the grave, was supposed to be a place beyond the reach of God. But not only that, this power of the grave was a power that could invade life itself, cutting you off from God, even in life. We know what he's talking about. All of us have experienced times when we felt we were in such a dark place that God would never be able to find us, let alone rescue us from it.

We have lost the one we love more than life itself how can there ever be escape from the grief? We can't leave a job that's stifling us or we've lost the work we need. Our children make choices that hurt them and us. The certainties of love and life crumble as reality crashes around us and we despair of finding a way out. Worse, we despair of God finding a way in.

The psalmist records his journey of pain through the valley of the shadow of death so that he will never forget. He needs to remember always who he was and where he has been. He remembers that he has been desperate and his circumstances were once deadly. He does this so that he will never forget how great his salvation was.

And then he remembers how his salvation came to him. He didn't try to convince God that he needed saving. He didn't try to dig his own way out of the pit. He even realized that apart from God, there was no one he could trust to get him out of his predicament. It was God or nothing. So, he cried the prayer that the Lord loves to answer: "O Lord, save my life!" Basically he just screams, Help!" And God rescues him.

We don't know what his affliction was and so we don't know the shape of his life after God saved him. What we do know is this: his life was in such bad shape that he thought that he would never see God again. But he did see the goodness, mercy and love of the Lord and that put his anxieties to rest. He can rest, be at peace because the grip of the grave no longer keeps him away from God. The destructive powers that have tried to drive God away have failed and he is at rest in the presence of God. And he remembers God's abundant grace toward him.

This is why he loves the Lord. For what God has done. We know who God is by what God does. We know God is merciful because we have received his mercy. We can confess that God is almighty because we have seen him conquer death in Jesus Christ and give us a hope of heaven instead of a fear of the grave. And so, with the psalmist, we love the God who has come into the darkest places of our lives and the most remote corners of our hearts and brought us into the light of his presence.

So, what are we going to do about it? The writer puts it this way: "What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me? I shall lift up the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord." Some translations ask "How can I repay the Lord?" The fact is, we can never repay the Lord for all of his goodness to us, but if we say we love the Lord for what he has done, then we must ask just exactly how we will express that love. We can't repay, but we can respond.

What is the response of our writer? He will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord. Those words should sound familiar they are often part of the liturgy of the Lord's Supper. And the reason they are a part of the Eucharist is because they were a part of the Passover celebration. During the Passover celebration, four cups of wine were drunk to remember four acts of God. The first cup was the Cup of Consecration; the second was the Cup of Proclamation. The fourth cup was the Cup of Praise. The third was the Cup of Salvation and it referred God's promise to redeem his people with a demonstration of his power. Lifting the cup of salvation was and is a strong reminder that God keeps his promises.

To lift up the cup of salvation was to remember the mighty acts of God that redeemed the people of God. It was at this celebration of Passover that Psalm 116 would be recited, reminding the Israelites that they had been brought from bondage to freedom, from sorrow to gladness, from darkness into light, from mourning into joy and from servitude into redemption.

It was this cup of salvation that Jesus gave to his disciples during the Last Supper. They didn't understand what he meant when he talked about the shedding of his blood what kind of demonstration of power is that? But it makes sense to us now. On this side of the resurrection. Because of Christ's work on the cross, we know that there is no place we can go that Christ cannot come and rescue us. And so, we too, lift up the cup of salvation.

John Faris, a pastor in the Presbyterian Church of Ireland, has said that when we lift the cup of salvation, we have to let go of the things we hold on to too tightly anxieties, ambitions, possessions, or success. We can't take the cup and keep grasping those things. Nor can we take the cup and hold onto resentments -- clinching our fists at the same time we are remembering our salvation. We have to give up a critical spirit we can't take the cup and be pointing our fingers at the same time.

What shall we return to the Lord for all he has done? Lifting up the cup of salvation means that we will remember that once we were far away from God, with no hope of finding our way back in the dark. We will remember that once we saw no hope in life, as we knew it. And when we remember who we were and where we were, we will then remember that God came for us. We will remember that his presence alone was enough to give us life, even if our circumstances didn't change.

Remembering our rescue will lead to thankfulness.

Among the enduring memories of September 11th are the efforts of the rescue workers, the first responders. We are moved to tears when we remember firefighters and other emergency workers who gave their lives to save others. They ran into the burning pit of a hell on earth in order to get people to safety. In response to the sacrifice, there was an out-pouring of gratitude as people donated to funds to care for their survivors.

Remembering our rescue from sin and death will lead to thankfulness. Just as the psalmist's love for God grew out of the realization that God had saved his life, so also will our love for God grow when we, too, remember God's salvation. That redemption is the door through which we leave an old way of living and enter into a new way of life. In the past, we lived out of ourselves, for ourselves, and toward ourselves. Because of our God's great rescue, we can live in Christ, for Christ and toward Christ. Because of what God has done for us in Christ Jesus, we will want to live in ways that honor God, for we no longer live for ourselves but for the One who redeemed us, for, as Paul reminds us in Corinthians, "we are not our own, we were bought with a price."

Believe it or not, the thankfulness expressed in Psalm 116 shows up at U2 rock concerts. In fact, the Psalm itself shows up. Just before the group sings Where the Streets Have No Name, Bono, the lead singer, quotes verses 12-14 using Eugene Peterson's paraphrase as found in the message. The song itself is about a yearning to be rescued from a dreary world in which love turns to rust, where we are just plain beaten up and then blown away by the wind. It's about going to a place where one is not alone and where life is not tossed away into a meaningless void. So before singing about the salvation he wants, Bono says:

What can I give back to God For the blessings he's poured out on me? I'll lift high the cup of salvation A toast to God I'll pray in the name of God I'll complete what I promised God I'll do And I'll do it together with his people.

Give it up? Indeed. Just like Bono, when we remember God's great goodness to us in Jesus, we can't help but show our appreciation and when our hearts are turned toward the Lord, we find that the grip of the false securities and the decaying hopes of this world loosen their hold on us. Then the prayer of Clement of Rome today's prayer of confession is answered. We no longer need to hoard our lives and our narrow selfishness is done away with, lost in the expanse of God's extravagant and unending love.

Amen.