

One for the Ages

Sunday, July 9, 2023

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First Scripture Reading (Jan Clouse, Lector)

Psalm 145:8 - 14 (NRSV)

⁸The LORD is **gracious** and **merciful**, **slow to anger** and abounding in steadfast love. ⁹The LORD is **good** to all, and his **compassion** is over all that he has made. ¹⁰All your works shall *give thanks* to you, O LORD, and all your faithful shall *bless* you. ¹¹They shall *speaking of the glory of your kingdom* and *tell of your power*, ¹²to make known to all people your mighty deeds and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. ¹³Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations. The LORD is **faithful** in all his words and gracious in all his deeds. ¹⁴The LORD **upholds** all who are falling and **raises up** all who are bowed down.

Response: Give thanks to the One whose word is life. **Blessed be God forever.**

Special Music (Olson family)

Discovery Time

Song: "Great Big God" by Nigel and Jo Hemming. © 2001 Vineyard Songs.

Second Scripture Reading

Matthew 11:25–30 (NRSV)

²⁵At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one **knows** the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

²⁸"*Come to me*, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will **give you rest**. ²⁹*Take my yoke upon you*, and *learn from me*, for I am **gentle and humble in heart**, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Response

For the word of God in Scripture, for the word of God within us, for the word of God among us, **Thanks be to God.**

Before I tell you this story, I should probably begin by saying that I was a really **studious student**. I absolutely **loved school**. So much so, that even if you tried to bribe me not to go to school, I still chose to go to school. Now that being said – *I can't remember actually studying in Study Hall.*

I do remember writing a lot of **poems** in Study Hall – some of them I probably even used for English class actually. But I also practiced writing my **name in cursive** – back before we knew that computers would eventually create a signature for us, you know. I wanted my signature to **show my personality**, so I tried to find ways to design it with squiggly lines and hearts over the l's.

And – to go along with that – I also made lists of what **type of person I hoped to marry** someday, and because I had written this list in the front cover of my poetry notebook, I still have the list.

My perfect partner would be **intellectual, friendly, and future-bound**. They would be **caring, fun, and truthful**. I had 15 things on that list, and I was reminded of it recently while reading our first scripture reading for today – **Psalm 145** – because...isn't the **greatest love story of all time** the love story **between God and humanity?**

We are all caught up in this **epic love story** – of God's **desire to connect with us**, God's desire to **take care of us**, to be a **really great partner to us**.

As I read **Psalm 145** again, I started to notice that **there was a list** there, too, of what a **perfect partner** might look like. I don't think I had ever thought about it that way before. But for the last several years, my work has had me reading a lot of **literature from the mystics**, and, without fail, they seem to always end up **talking about union with God**.

I'll give you a couple of examples:

How many of you have heard of Teresa of Avila? She was a **Carmelite nun** with quite a remarkable story, which is probably best left for another time. But in a book called *The Life of Teresa of Avila*, translated by J. M. Cohen, we hear:

"How what is called "union" takes place and what it is, I cannot tell...I cannot understand what "mind" is, or how it differs from "soul" or "spirit." They all seem one to me, though the soul sometimes leaps out of itself like a burning fire that has become one whole flame and increases with great force. The **flame leaps very high above the fire. Nevertheless, it is not a different thing but the same flame which is in the fire.** What I want to explain is the soul's feelings when it is in this divine union. It is plain enough what union is: **In union two separate things become one.**" – from *The Life of Teresa of Avila*, translated by J. M. Cohen.

So in this little excerpt here, Teresa of Avila seems to be **trying to explain** what she feels is **utterly indescribable**. "*What is the mind?*" "*How is it different from the spirit exactly?*" Maybe it's all one. But other times it doesn't feel that way, sometimes, they seem very **distinguishable**. The **spiritual** seems to be **amplified**. ...And yet, even then...**not really**. Somehow, it's all **still one thing** – the **flame** is the **fire**. The **fire** is the **flame**. It's all a bit **strange**. But **one thing** is **certain**...

And this is where we all move forward in our seats right? Because we really want to hear that one certain thing. For which she says: *In union, two separate things become one.*

Ah – but that is **not really the thing** – the thing is **the feeling of the soul** – that when the **soul** is in **divine union** – it is **then** that **it knows** – *I am not separate from God. I am one with God.*

...as if there are these moments when things become **strangely clearer** than they are on other days.

And **Thomas Merton** describes something similar. Does anyone know Thomas Merton? He was a relatively modern **Trappist Monk** who completed his life in 1968. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, on page 140, he wrote this:

"In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that **they were mine and I theirs**, that

we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was **like waking from a dream of separateness**, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. **The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream.**” – p. 140 of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* by Thomas Merton.

So here, Merton **doesn't specifically describe his one** singular experience of **union with God**. He describes it **in connection with everyone around him** – that all of it **was – and is – connected**. He says: *I just suddenly realized it. I suddenly got it. We were all ooey, gooey connected in this great big love story. There was no “I.” There was only “we,” only “us.”*

Now, of course, the sort of love we're talking about isn't **erotic love**, it's not **brotherly love**, it's not **familial love**. The sort of love we're describing is **Agape Love** – this type of love that offers **unconditional regard**, that can grasp that we are **not the mistakes** we've made and the things we **wish were different** – that **beneath** all of that **is who we really are**.

And so these **concepts** are a bit **difficult to grasp** because we live in a very **individualistic society**. We are **assigned numbers and labels** at a very **young age**...and then those numbers and labels are **posted publicly** in some cases, either by us or by others, so that we can be sure and **figure out who is the “best.”**

And this **tree of the knowledge of good and evil** – that was **all about becoming aware of our separateness**, our **judgments**, our **shame**. This great, epic **love story** that we're all **a part of**, reminds us that, somewhere, in the **deepest places** of ourselves, **we are not ashamed** of who we are. We **don't hide from God**, and we **don't blame one another and God** for things that have gone on.

But this is a **journey** that requires a lot of **compassion**, a lot of **gentleness**.

When I started my **spiritual direction training** several years ago now, we would receive our **modules by email**. And at the bottom of those early module documents was a **phrase** I had never heard from someone who had the power to pass or fail me before.

The bottom of the page said: ***Go slowly and be gentle with yourself.***

I assure you I had **no idea how** to do that. I – who had participated in **competitions** since I was in middle school, who was trying to **appear smart** and **capable** while raising **4 babies** – I had no idea how to go slowly and be gentle with myself.

But if we look at **Psalm 145**, in fact, “slowly and compassionately” is exactly the sort of interaction that David describes.

We hear:

- The Lord is GRACIOUS. And MERCIFUL, that God is PATIENT, GOOD, not just to us personally, but to all, that God is COMPASSIONATE, again, not just to us – but to ALL that God has made.

That will blow the mind a little bit. We might understand why God might be compassionate with all *who* God has made, but this says that God is compassionate **over all that** God has made. So interesting when we start thinking about **the flame being one with the fire** and how the *illusion of holy separateness* turns out to be **more of a dream** than anything. David, too, is expanding the picture. All that God has made, **human or not**, is receiving the same graciousness, the same compassion.

David continues on,

- The Lord is FAITHFUL. What God says God will do, God will do.

And then **verse 14**

- The Lord will UPHOLD...meaning, the Lord will SUPPORT all who are falling...when we feel like absolute failures – we won't be chided, we'll be supported. The Lord will RAISE us UP, ELEVATE us as we bow down.

This is quite the relationship, is it not?

And so I went back to my list that I had made in high school. **Were any of these qualities on my list?** In a way, yes. Someone **caring and understanding** was definitely there. But much of **my list** was still **concerned with status and labels** – and probably still is, to some degree. It's the human condition!

But just like David, just like Teresa of Avila, just like Thomas Merton, in those moments where I **stop trying to measure up, wow, what an amazing partner God is!**

...There was a TV show called *This is Us* that came out in the fall of 2016. Perhaps you know it?

The show is a series of love stories really, all of them, sort of originating with these two parents Jack and Rebecca. When Jack & Rebecca meet, she's a singer that comes from a wealthy family. He's a young veteran struggling to make ends meet. And so these two find that they like each other quite a bit, but Rebecca's dad doesn't approve and says as much to Jack, which causes Jack to run off, assuming Rebecca's out of reach. Naturally, though, because this is the way shows work, Rebecca finds out what her dad has said to Jack and realizes she has to set the record straight, that how her father feels is not how she feels.

And so she shows up as his job just as they're about to close and delivers this epic line that comes back again and again throughout the show. She says to him:

“We're gonna have it all together. We're going to have big moments and small moments, and it's going to be one for the ages.” – Rebecca to Jack in *This is Us*

Our relationship **with God** – it's kind of **like that**, right? The whole epic love story between us and God – it's one for the ages, isn't it? The best love story of all time...if only we can **become even just a little bit aware of it!**

And that really is the trouble, as we hear about in Matthew 11. Verse 25 tells us that we **don't tend to access this great love story** between us and God **with our minds**. It's not the *wise and intelligent* part of us **that understands** it. Jesus says, *“It's revealed to infants.”*

It's revealed...or maybe more said a different way...we begin to **see the connection** between us and God with that **part of us** that is able to access **childlike wonder** and **curiosity**. It's in *those* moments that we're **able to receive** the message – not just see it as all too ooey gooey for us – this unity between us and God – this love story for the ages.

And just **to clarify** – it's **not** a **child-ish** love. It's a **child-like** love. We begin to understand it when we can **know and be known** with **child-like wonder and awe**.

...Now...Child-like wonder is **almost comical at times**. Things like: The absolute **amazement** at a **toad** in the yard. But at **other times**...the other thing about being a child is that we are more connected to, more aware of our **inter-dependency**. We're more aware that we **need others to help us**.

The **older** we get, the more we'd like to **believe** that we're **self-sufficient**. But **verse 27** of Matthew 11 talks to us about **knowing God**. The Son *knows* the Father and the Father *knows* the Son and that **same knowing** that exists **between them** has to be **revealed to us**.

And so what does it mean to *know* God?

If we return to **Psalm 145**, perhaps at least part of it is that we would feel safe, cared for, seen, held... Perhaps what makes our love story *one for the ages* is this ability to get **in touch with our inter-dependency**.

We **can't see** the great love story between us when we're **so busy trying to fend for ourselves**. But when we enter into that **child-like space**, we realize, our **one-ness is entirely wrapped up in our we-ness**.

The ways in which we identify ourselves are perhaps fun and part of how we distinguish ourselves in a world that forces us to measure up, to prove our worth. But the **Kingdom of God isn't about those things**.

In the Kingdom of God, we are **held in unconditional regard, cared for** and seen and helped because we simply are. Not because of *who* we are but *because* we are.

I recently encountered a woman named Etty Hillesum. She was a Jewish woman who lived in the Netherlands and died at Aushwitz. She aspired to be a writer, and in the end, she was. But probably not in the way she had intended. The writings that have come down to us are in the form of diary entries and letters she wrote during the holocaust. On page 160 of *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries and Letters of Etty Hillesum*, she says:

“Something in me is growing and every time I look inside, something fresh has appeared and **all I have to do is accept it**, to take it upon myself, to bear it forward, and to **let it flourish**.” – p. 160 of *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries and Letters of Etty Hillesum, a Jewish woman who lived in the Netherlands and ultimately died at Auschwitz*

I wonder if this is the **great secret to how we connect with** this great love story between us and God – of *knowing and being known* – to **simply accept it**.

Etty Hillesum, who lived to be all of 29 years old, was living in the midst of incomprehensible horrors. Certainly, as the war began, her experience of life had been about **doing** the things, **succeeding** by the **standards** others were offering her.

But as that **system** began to **prove itself wanting**, she **turned inward**, finding a **Light that existed within**, regardless of everything else.

And instead of having to *do* anything, instead of having to *prove* herself in any way, she found that all she had to do was **accept it**. And in doing so, this **great love for the ages flourished within**.

And so – **how do we** – in 2023 **live into this great love** – this great love story between us and the Divine?

Is it **possible** that all we have to do is **accept it**?

As Jesus says in the final verses of today's reading:

You who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, come to me. I will give you rest. I am gentleness. Come and you will find rest for your souls. You will know Me and I will be known by you.

Take a **pause** from your **worries** and your **to-do lists**, your **service** and your **caregiving**. Lay it all down for **just a moment**. **Lean in** and **rest** *not just your head* but **your entire self**. It seems like a little thing. But **when you return** to those things you are resting from, perhaps you will find that the **load is lighter**, that some of the things have **mysteriously disappeared** from the list or **seem less important** somehow.

I will do this for you because I love you. Because this thing we've got going – it's full of big moments, it's full of small moments. And it's one for the ages.

Chimes

Hymn #418 "Softly and Tenderly"

Joys and Concerns

- We pray to the Lord: **Lord, hear our prayer.**

As we rejoin with our online worshipers...

Loving God, you have invited all who are burdened and weary to come to you, that you would give us rest, that you would be a gracious, compassionate, faithful God, holding us up in both our Joys and our Sorrows. With this invitation and these promises in mind, we pray the Prayers of the People, saying:

Prayers of the People

We wait for you Lord, **in your word we hope.**

And together we pray as we were taught to pray, saying:

Our Father who are in heaven, hallowed by Thy Name, Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen

Offering

Prayer of Dedication

Closing Hymn #366 Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" (St 1, 4)

Charge and Benediction

In the busyness and worries of life, may you find space.

May God's love surround your living.

And wherever you go, may you know God's presence.