

Season after Pentecost
Psalm of Thanksgiving 40

June 27, 2015

Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: Luke 17: 11-19; Psalm 40

Grace to you and peace from God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

Three sons left home, went out on their own and prospered. They each credited their parents for their success. With their father now deceased, they each decided to give their mother special gifts to express their gratitude. When they got together, they each proudly told about the gift they were able to give their elderly mother.

The first said, "I built a big house for Mom. It's spacious and elegant" The second said, "I sent her a Mercedes with a driver." The third smiled and said, "I've got you both beat. You remember how mom enjoyed reading the Bible? And you know she can't see very well. So I sent her a remarkable parrot that recites the entire Bible. It took elders in the church 12 years to teach him. He's one of a kind. Mama just has to name the chapter and verse, and the parrot recites it."

Soon thereafter, their mother sent out her letters of thanks: "Milton," she wrote her eldest son, "Thank you for the house. It is huge. I live in only one room, and spend much of my time cleaning the rest of the house." "Gerald," she wrote to another, "The car is impressive. As I've gotten older, I stay at home most of the time, so I confess I rarely use the Mercedes. And the driver is so rude!" "Dearest Donald," she wrote to her third son, "You have the good sense to know what your mother likes. The chicken was delicious."¹

What these gentlemen missed in their attempts to express gratitude were the character and desire of the recipient. Their gifts were elaborate displays of wealth but of no real no value to their mother. The sons did not take the time to learn about their mother at this juncture of her life. They did not ask their mother what she would want or need. Instead of gratitude, their gifts showed the woeful absence of a current and meaningful relationship with their mom. Expressions of gratitude, no matter how generous or well-meaning, can be empty gestures when they show no active knowledge or disregard for that individual who is supposedly being honored.

How do we express thanks to our Lord, the giver of life and all good gifts? As Lutherans we strongly proclaim that we can do nothing to earn, win, connive or buy the love of God or the eternal life freely give us by our Lord throughout baptism. Our lives are therefore to be lived as a response to that undeserved grace. How do we express gratitude to God? What kind of response does God desire? The composer of Psalm 40 senses God has some definite preferences.

This psalmist has come through devastating times and credits God with getting him through. He wasn't spared from trials but delivered from them. He had to wait patiently, but his life moved out of desolation and muck to a place where he could again find his footing and a sense of security. But he did not find himself back where he started before the troubles. His life, his faith have been changed. He has been transformed by that experience. God has put a "new song" in his mouth and a deeper trust in God's faithfulness and goodness. It's like a light switch has been turned on or cataracts removed. He can now see the senselessness of putting trust in any other idols or gods. * (v.) He can see more clearly "the wondrous deeds of God" and God's love toward us, in the history of Israel and his own life, too. (v.) And while the Hebrew tradition would be to go make a sacrificial offering at the temple in thanks for God's deliverance, the psalmist senses this is not what God really wants. God doesn't want a mansion, Mercedes, a parrot that can recite the Bible or even a tasty chicken. What the psalmist believes God really wants is POW — Praise, Obedience and Witness. POW.

In thanksgiving to God we offer our praise. It's not the same praise you offer someone trying to play a sport or master a skill. "You can do it! Good try! ... Shake it off. You'll get it next time . . . That's the way to do it! : God isn't in need of our "atta boy's." The praise we offer God is a recognition of God's love and gifts. We pray and sing God praises of thanksgiving as a declaration that we know God is God and we are not . . . which is a VERY good thing. We praise God because WE need to stay connected to our Lord. WE need to attend to that relationship. WE need to stay mindful of God's blessing and presence, never take them for granted. "Praise" — the "P" of the POW of thanksgiving.

It's not a sacrificial offering the Lord desires, the psalmist writes, but a life that seeks to trust and follow the will and ways of God. "I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart." Filled with thanksgiving for God's deliverance . . . filled with a greater trust in God's faithfulness, the psalmist's wants to do what the Lord wants him to do. In fact it gives him great pleasure to do what please the Lord. It brings him that deeply rich feelings you have when a gift you've given is received with utter joy. Obeying God's instructions, when you are so grateful, is not a burden but a delight. It gladdens the psalmist to live in ways that honor God who honors us with eternal love. What a freeing way to think of obedience to God's commands and teachings. To grasp, as Jesus did, obedience to God as an expression of gratitude and love to God who can

be trusted. How does God like to be thanked? POW ---Praise. Obedience . . . and Witness.

Look again at verses 9 and 10 in Psalm 40. "I have told the glad news . . . I have not restrained my lips . . . I have not hidden . . . I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation . . . I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the congregation." When something good happens to you, you can hardly wait to tell others. You get on the phone or text people you know. Heck you may find yourself telling perfect strangers — "you just won't believe what just happened." The psalmist tells the Lord he has not squandered the news of his saved and new life. He has not kept it to himself. He's been sharing it so others too may be led to trust in the goodness of God. In telling others what God has done for him, he is publicly giving credit, honor and thanks to the Lord.

Praise. Obey. Witness. POW If you ask the writer of Psalm 40, that's the kind of thanks that pleases God. Gratitude is a believer's lifestyle, not just a word. Thanks-giving has further built up his faith and confidence in God and God's goodness. As the psalmist faces the threat and fear of a new crisis, he turns to God in deep trust. He shares his fears and circumstances and even how he wishes the evil he confronts would be thwarted. He still faces fright and pain but HE is different. He has a deeper, stabilizing relationship with the Lord, born of the praise, obedience and witness that have become a part of who he is. "I may be poor and needy," he concludes, " but he has a new song to sing. "God has me in God's sight. Great is the Lord, my help and deliverer." The psalmist has been enPOWERed and prays we too will find such hope and confidence in POW living.

So let's practice our POW. This morning, let's thank God for the blessings we've experienced in this past week, yesterday, this morning. By offering our thanks aloud, we offer God our praise and our witness to one another. The blessing may be seemingly small or deeply profound. Don't worry about sounding eloquent or "churchy" Start off saying, "Thank you, Lord" and say that for which you are grateful. When a "thanks-giving" is concluded, we'll all say "Praise, God." [I'll demonstrate & then allow time for others to offer their witness and praise. At the conclusion:] To God be all glory, honor and praise. Let all God's people say, "Amen!"

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ENDNOTE

1. Norman Lawrence, illustration posted on sermoncentral.com