September 17, 2017
Psalm 138
Love

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Psalm 138 New Revised Standard Version

I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise; I bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness; for you have exalted your name and your word above everything. On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul.

All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord, for they have heard the words of your mouth. They shall sing of the ways of the Lord, for great is the glory of the Lord. For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly; but the haughty he perceives from far away. Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies; you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me. The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.

“Here I come to worship. Here I come to bow down. Here I come to say that you’re my God. ”[[1]](#footnote-2) Why do you come to church? At some churches it may be to see and be seen, but not here. At some churches it may be because of the amenities. I had a pastor friend whose church was building a new building and my pastor friend was convinced that people came to church because of the bathrooms. He wanted the bathrooms in the new church to smell like flowers because then people would come. Our amazing Trustees led by Patrick Beeker and Lanny Hassell have remodeled our bathrooms, but I don’t think that is the reason that someone comes to Greenland Hills. Maybe you come here to worship, to bow down, to say that God is our God.

We are in the middle of talking about Wonder, Love, and Praise, which is the last line in “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” and also the title of a document about the nature of the church written by our own Charles Wood for the United Methodist Church. We will be discussing more about this document in depth tonight At the Table and In Conversation from 5:00-7:00 p.m. in Glory Be Hall and you all are welcome to come!

 Last week I said that wonder, love, and praise is what life is all about - knowing, loving, and enjoying our Creator. Last week we talked about wonder and being in awe of the wonders and signs of God. I am in wonder at the activity of God when I see a mountain, or stand with my toes in the sand at the ocean, or hold a new baby. I am in wonder at the activity of God when I see my growing children and how they are becoming young adults who love God and have compassion for others. By faith we claim that God’s love never leaves us, God’s love never forsakes us, and God’s love is always there - even when we can’t see it, even when we can’t feel it.

Stan Copeland is the pastor at Lovers Lane UMC and gave me this stole after I had the privilege of working with him for two years. This summer his daughter was married and they were so thankful because Stan’s mom was able to come to the wedding. Stan’s mom has battled Parkinson’s for thirty years, but she was feeling up to it, so she and Stan’s dad spent two nights away from home to enjoy the wedding festivities in Dallas. As the family was dancing the night away, they could see a thunderstorm out in the east. As they made their way back to their hotel rooms for the evening, Stan’s dad called him to let him know that in that thunderstorm, their home had been struck by lightening and burned to the ground. They told Stan’s mom the next morning that everything that she owned had been destroyed and she cried out, “all my things,” and then a few minutes later she said, “they are just things.” As Stan went out to his childhood home to see if there was anything that was salvageable, he found the remnants of a church newsletter from fifteen years before that his mom had saved. In the middle of that charred at the edges piece of paper was these words from 1 John 4:16, “And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God and God in him.”

I don’t think that God sent the lightning strike that destroyed Stan’s parents home because I don’t believe that God sends suffering. We suffer and the world suffers because we are human and part of a system of processes and a physical environment where things go wrong. We are never alone in our suffering. God is with us through it all. When Stan found that scripture written on a church newsletter fifteen years ago, it was a reminder that God’s love was there.

It is like Psalm 138 reminds us, “On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul.” Or like Psalm 23 reminds us, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.”

God loves us so much. When I am at my most vulnerable and I feel lost and alone and afraid, I have to open myself up to the love of God because I yearn to be loved. The tricky part is when we equate God with the church. The church is a gift from God, but it is also a human community and institution.[[2]](#footnote-3) We will be hurt by the church and the people inside of it, it isn’t a question of if but when. It makes my heart hurt thinking that something I represent hurts and will hurt others, so the only thing that I know to do is to be someone who loves those who have been hurt and are hurting. I want to be the opposite of the hurting church.

God is important in my life but I need a community to help me live a life where I grow in love with God and in love with my neighbor. I can’t do it alone. I can’t. When I haven’t been involved in the church, I didn’t grow in love with God and in love with my neighbor. I come to this place so that I can be an intentional Christian, so I can be generous, so I can learn about Jesus, so I can be reminded that I am never alone. I pay the bills in my family and I remember the day that I realized I didn’t want to pay more for my cell phones than we did to our church. I don’t want my giving to the restaurants of Dallas to be more than my giving to God at Greenland Hills United Methodist Church. God is my first priority in my life and I want my giving to show that. My husband Lee and I make giving to the church a priority in our life and I am so thankful that our giving to the church is now more than our mortgage or our giving to the federal government. It is one way that I show God how much I love God. It is one way that I give thanks for God’s steadfast love of me.

God loves us so much. God loves me and God loves you so much. I am imperfect and I am afraid, but I am loved. You are imperfect and you are afraid, but you are loved. You are worthy of God’s love. You are God’s beloved child.

This Sunday will be the fifth time that Greenland Hills will walk in the Alan Ross Freedom Parade, the Pride Parade, and the first time that the seven reconciling United Methodist churches in North Texas will walk together. Reconciling Churches mobilize United Methodists of all sexual orientations and gender identities to transform our Church and world into the full expression of Christ’s inclusive love. This will be my tenth time to walk in the Pride Parade. I walked for five years at Oak Lawn UMC when I served as an Associate Pastor there and this will be my fifth time with Greenland Hills. I have continued to walk because of an encounter that happened while I was walking that first year. We were walking down Cedar Springs and we heard cheers and many folks were telling us, “Thank you for walking.” People were expressing their gratitude that a church would walk in solidarity with them. People were expressing their gratitude that a church would walk as a way to share their love. We were about halfway down the route and a man grabbed my hand and said, “I remember you.” He told me that he had been a teenager in Krum, Texas, when I served as a pastor there and that he had been deeply depressed and close to suicide. He remembered me from the articles that I wrote in the weekly Krum newspaper. He asked me, “Will your church accept me?” Tears ran down my face and I said, “Yes, yes, please come. You will find a family that loves you.” I never saw him again, but I think about him and pray for him often. I hope that I will see him one day and that I will be able to thank him for the gift that he gave me. He helped me to see the importance of churches being a part of Pride. And I have walked every year since.

Why do I come to church? Because I want to make a difference. Because the church is where I felt loved when I didn’t feel loved anywhere else. I come to church because when I’m involved in church I practice gratitude in my daily life, I feel hopeful when I am involved in church. I come because I love God and because I have felt God’s hand with me throughout my life. I come to church to feel the love of God, here in worship and by being in community with all of you. I come because I want to raise my family in this community. Did you hear that we had 57 children and youth last Sunday in Sunday School and at youth group? We had 11 children in the preK-Kindergarten class, 11 in the 1st-3rd class, 5 in the 4th-5th class, 10 in 6th grade Confirmation, 8 in Youth Sunday School and 12 Youth in the evening. I give thanks to God for Kristin Mallory, our amazing Children and Youth Minister, and to all of you for trusting us with your children. We want our children and youth to know that they are loved by God, that they can always find in this place help, hope and home. They belong in this place.

Why do you come to church? Do you feel a sense of wonder? Do you feel the abundant love? Do you want to praise our God? You belong in this place. Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. Chris Tomlin. “Here I am to Worship.” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FaUTv1pXRyU [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. http://s3.amazonaws.com/Website\_Properties/council-of-bishops/committee-faith-order/documents/wonder-love-and-praise-full-en.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)