

**Homily, St. Andrew's  
Proper 18C, July 31, 2016  
Psalm 107**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Psalm 107 is one of my favourite passages of scripture. For years I called it my “theme-psalm” because I have interacted with it so many times in different ways. I had almost forgotten until I saw part of it as the assigned psalm for today. In my first semester of seminary I choreographed the first seven verses. It was a personal, choreographic experiment that I ended up performing many times over the years. It reappeared in my last semester of seminary when I wrote a major paper about it and choreographed the second verse as a kind of summary of my three years of studying and attending daily worship. More, perhaps, than any other piece of scripture, Psalm 107 has accompanied me and taught me about the power of poetry and the power of expressing our understanding of, and relationship with, God, particularly in and through worship.

We read it a few minutes ago using different voices in the format we did, because I wanted to highlight its liturgical format. More than just the words, this liturgical, poetic format itself forms a kind of sermon on God’s steadfast love and our response to it. The theme is stated clearly in the first verse: “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, his steadfast love endures forever.” God’s steadfast love reappears throughout the psalm and is the final word in the last verse.

The Hebrew word used here for “steadfast love” is *hesed*. It is a common word in the Old Testament, particularly in the psalms, and is sometimes translated as mercy or goodness. *Hesed* can also appear in the plural, as it does in the last verse of this psalm, so more than a feeling, it can be understood to mean “gracious deeds” or “acts of kindness.” And while overwhelmingly used to describe God’s actions and feelings, *hesed* is also used twice to describe the “good deeds” or “faithful deeds” of human rulers Kings Hezekiah and Josiah. So the concept of *hesed* is a love, a kindness and a grace that is active, social and enduring. God’s steadfast love and faithfulness, is broad, enduring, concrete, active and interactive.

Now if the first verse of the introduction of Psalm 107 identifies its major theme, the second verse identifies the method by which the ‘sermon’ will proceed. “O give thanks!” it begins... “Let the redeemed of the Lord say so! Those he has redeemed from trouble, and gathered together.” And so the psalm continues, expounding, if you will, on God’s *hesed* using 4 different examples, identified as ‘verses’ in the bulletin. These 4 examples are like brief testimonies to God’s loving action in people lives. The testimonies follow a 4-part pattern with the individuals or small groups describing some kind of trouble they have encountered, then crying out to the Lord, the Lord responding with needed help, and finally the people giving thanks for God’s steadfast love, God’s *hesed*, and wonderful works.

What I love about this psalm, is how it sets out for us both the grand biblical theme of God’s active, enduring and broad love for us, AND how it sets out for us a method for worship... “Let the redeemed of the Lord, say so!” And note the directive at the end of the 4 testimonies... “Let them extol him in the congregation of the people, and praise him in the assembly of the

elders.” This psalm doesn’t allow us to remain in our internal selves or our own private spheres. Instead, it calls us into community. It calls us into the ‘congregation of the people’ to speak of what God has done – of what we know of God’s good works in the world.

In 1981, founder of Sojourners Jim Wallis, originally published a book titled: *The Call to Conversion: Why Faith is Always Personal but Never Private*. In the introduction, he names his purpose in the book to “seek the biblical meaning of conversion and apply it to the particular history we face. The question we seek to answer is: What is the meaning of conversion now?” Growing up as an evangelical Christian, he reflects how conversion was key in his evangelical upbringing, describing himself, like many evangelical children, as being ‘saved’ at a young age. “That conversion, however,” he writes, “was rarely related to any concrete historical realities. It remained private and abstract, focused primarily on a few personal habits and practices.” After a period of rejecting this childhood faith, he has, in his own words, “become more convinced that understanding conversion is really the central issue for today’s churches.” And 35 years after originally writing this, he still believes it and continues to teach and preach about a Christian faith that is always personal, but never private.

This renewed understanding of conversion is spoken of in a different way by church historian Diana Butler-Bass. She is recognized as one of the leaders in mainstream church revitalization, and based on extensive on-the-ground research, she presents a model of church growth and decline along an axis from ‘established’ to ‘intentional’. Her research showed that the common thread in vital, growing and active congregations is their level of intentionality of spiritual practice. On the ‘established’ vs. ‘intentional’ axis, established congregations are ones where Christian faith is assumed, where there are few expectations of on-going spiritual formation, where everyone just knows the meaning in the liturgy, and where ‘insiders’ and ‘outsides’ (or the ‘saved’ and ‘unsaved’) are clearly defined.

On the other hand, intentional congregations are ones where a variety of spiritual practices are... well... practiced... They are where public, communal worship is highly valued; where personal, daily prayer is encouraged; where the bible is studied; where tithing is expected; where hospitality and valuing difference is a way of life; and where social outreach or social justice is central. Using Jim Wallis’ language, intentionality is the mark of historically-grounded conversion... it’s a conversion that isn’t a one-time, private, and abstract spiritual experience, but rather conversion that comes from personal spiritual experience that is worked out in community and lived out in the world in whatever historical moment we find ourselves in. It is an on-going turning away from self and sin... that which is killing us, and a turning toward God and others in resurrection life, with a faith that is always personal, but never private.

Psalms 107 offers one biblical example of such intentional spiritual practice, by focusing on proclaiming God’s active goodness, faithfulness, and love through a method of inviting “the redeemed of the Lord” to say so... in the congregation of the people. It is a method that we can intentionally use, by reflecting on experiences in our own lives and considering the pattern of experiencing some kind of trouble, crying out to the Lord, receiving the Lord’s help, and responding publicly with praise for God’s steadfast love and faithfulness. Part of the brilliance of the poetry, and the helpfulness of the format, is that it provides a structure for expression and a framework for unpacking the meaning of life’s experiences in relationship to God.

So this morning we’re going to do just that. This week I asked a few people if they would be willing to participate by thinking about ‘trouble’ in their own lives, defined in any which way

they chose, and writing their own verse to Psalm 107. As they come forward, let me say that this is not a particularly easy task. We all experience trouble in one way or another, but it is always a difficult and vulnerable experience. It is even more difficult and vulnerable to share that experience with a community of people. So I am very grateful for their willingness to ‘play along,’ so to speak, in living out the biblical directive in Psalm 107, and taking this step in a faith that is personal, but not private. Through their courage to share with all of us, they complete the pattern exhorted in the psalm, of an act of public praise for what God has done. But it isn’t just they who do this act of public praise, it is all of us, as we participate as the ‘congregation of the people,’ encouraging one another and being intentional about our spiritual practice.

So we are going to recite Psalm 107 again, only this time a “St. Andrew’s version.” You don’t have a written copy, but we will use the refrains in verse 1 on the insert you have, and I will cue you when it’s time to join in...

[group reading]

What is the verse, or verses, you might contribute?

What troubles have you experienced?

How have you cried out to the Lord?

What help has come in response to your prayer?

How have you shared your story, offering public praise for God’s steadfast love and faithfulness?

I’ll be happy to help with the writing if that’s what is needed.

May we extol God in the congregation of the people, and praise God in the assembly of the elders.

May we wisely give heed to these things, and consider the steadfast love of the Lord in our lives, in our community, and in the world.