

*<sup>1</sup> I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise;<sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> On the day I called, you answered me; you increased my strength of soul. <sup>4</sup> All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord, for they have heard the words of your mouth. <sup>5</sup> They shall sing of the ways of the Lord, for great is the glory of the Lord. <sup>6</sup> For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly, but the haughty he perceives from far away. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.*

One of the things I love most about the Psalms is how truly human they are. I mean, if we aren't careful, our worship can turn into shallow platitudes that offer a lot of flashy church words but very little depth of relevance and meaning. If we aren't careful, we use titles like Immutable Love and then wonder why no one is interested in hearing what we plan to say.

Not the Psalmists though. Life is too on the edge for them. Their prayers, and songs, and litanies must take a bite out of the struggle of a very hard life that the people are enduring. There is no room for show...this...their faith...their prayers...their hope...are sometimes all they have. And I love that they see no need to be meek and mild in their approach to God...these are hard confessions, deep truths, heart-wrenching cries, that are shouted, not whispered.

Our English language sometimes mellows the words too much. I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise; Anyone remember from back in the 70's when "in your face" became a slang term for bold, defiant aggressiveness? When we were ready to confront someone, we were going to get "in their face." Does it surprise you to know, that is the literal translation of the first verse of this prayer of thanksgiving? I give thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart, right in the face of other gods, I will sing your praise.

**Defiant gratitude!**

In the Psalmist's day, they were no doubt talking about the pagan gods whose temples and statues and marketplaces surrounded them. In our day, the gods are a bit less obvious but no less present. When trouble hits and we find ourselves distressed we are prone to reach out for all kinds of salvation – we cry to the god of economic wealth and determine that the right amount of money will save us. Or the god of self-help and feel assured that we can pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and be fine. Or maybe the god of political parties, certain that the evils of the opposing party must be conquered and all will be right again. Or...well...you get the point...there are plenty of places in which we put our trust and our faith that it will be what saves us...forgetting that while God may work through some of those avenues, it is God and God alone who saves. Our Psalmist has learned to defiantly offer thanks, in the face of other gods, for this truth. There is one God who saves and is worthy of our praise.

The other very real truth of this psalm is that being saved by God doesn't always mean being removed from all troubling situations. As we well know, there are many good and faithful people who find themselves in distressing places and they don't escape them, or maybe are delivered from one only to later find themselves in another later.

Maybe we cling to the old adages of Job's day that believed if we are right with God then nothing bad will happen to us, because that is how we WANT it to be...we want to believe we can somehow be right enough with God that we will become immune to distress and suffering...but that simply is not our reality, and the psalmist knows that.

*"On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul... 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."*

As we have learned, we spend our lives living in the midst of trouble. There is no escaping that this side of heaven. There is, however, a steadfast, faithful God who walks in the midst of it with us and is worthy to be praised for strengthening our soul to endure the walk. Further, the Psalmist believes that this experience of strengthening our soul will result in God's purpose being lived out through us and implies that our purpose is found in God's love...God's immutable, unchanging, steadfast, faithful love.

We were talking in Bible study last week about how we can know we are interpreting the book of Revelation in the right way. I explained that I can't know for certain that I am, but what I do believe is that God's essential truth isn't found in outlier beliefs. What we know of our immutable God is that God's truth is universal and everlasting. What we read in Revelation should have the same ribbons of truth that we find in

Genesis, or Exodus, or Isaiah, or Matthew, or Romans. We look for the ribbons of truth that run throughout God's story.

While the Psalms were written long before Jesus was made known, Jesus came to make the truth of this psalm known – all purpose is found in God's immutable love. We will remember how Jesus was asked what he believed the greatest commandment was and he replied, there are two. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. That's a lot of love to go around. All the other commandments are covered by these two – for if we can love God with all we are, we find the strength of soul to love others in the same way...immutable...unchanging...steadfast love.

Could it be that this is how God's purpose is lived out in us? That the God of pure, unchanging love wants us to exhibit the same kind of pure, unchanging love, to the world?

What would it look like for us to love God in this way?

What might it look like for us to love creation in this way?

What might it look like for us to love the immigrant in this way? or the Muslim, or the afflicted, or the unemployed, or the homeless, or the one whose lifestyle is different than our own?

Closely linked to God's love is God's grace. God's loving goodwill to all, regardless of their merit. In the United Methodist Church, we understand God's grace in three ways: Prevenient grace, Justifying grace, and Sanctifying grace.

Prevenient grace is the "grace that comes before," pre – before...basically it is our belief that God's loves us even before we can love God. God loves us even before we can earn that love or deserve that love. It is Prevenient grace, I believe, that holds the key to God's immutability.

If God loves as we are prone to love, we might be in trouble. Our love is too often conditional. We love until we feel we aren't sufficiently loved in return, and we give up on loving, We love until we find something or someone we love more, and we let go of one to cling to another. Our love can be fickle and unstable and unbalanced. We love one thing and believe we must show favoritism for it at the expense of other things. Our love can be unjust and unloving. But none of these ways of love reflect the purpose that God has given us...to love preveniently: To love creation simply because God loves creation. To love others simply because God loves them. To love ourselves because God loves us. We are called to love, not to reward worth, but to realize that love sees beyond worth and into the heart of our creator.

Justifying grace is the moment we recognize and accept God's love and sanctifying grace is how we spend the rest of our lives trying to do as the Psalmist writes – letting the purpose of God's love live on through us...trying to practice the same unchanging love for the world and the people in it that God does.

When we can do that, we can change the world...<sup>4</sup> *All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord, for they have heard the words of your mouth.* <sup>5</sup> *They shall sing of the ways of the Lord, for great is the glory of the Lord.*

The kings of the world will have heard of this great love...they will learn the songs of praise that come from us, from the followers of Christ who have sung of his love, been saved by his love, live our lives by the model of his love. They will have learned the words of love, the glory of love, the truth of love...the same truth that runs from Genesis to Revelation and meets in the middle with God so loved the world that he gave his only son, not to condemn the world but to save it.

That love...immutable...unchangeable...inspiring, purpose building love....that carries us through days of trouble and days of rejoicing. That love...is where we are called to live.

Prayer:

Loving and grace-filled God,

We are grateful for your steadfast love of us, in the face of how fickle we sometimes are in our love for you. We are humbled by the faithful ways you walk with us, even on paths that you warned us to avoid.

We offer our praise to you for sending us your son, who modeled for us a love that is unchanging, yet filled with accountability...a love that is all-encompassing, and still exhibits justice in its midst...a love that is unconditional and yet is invitational to live within the conditions of righteousness and peace.

May we take hold and carry the ribbon of this truth into the world, that all may experience your great love, Amen.