

From Personal to Communal

Psalm 118:1-3, 19-29

Psalm 118 was one of the best known psalms in Jesus' day. Jesus himself quotes from it several times, and crowds sing from it as he enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. It was sung in the temple, with different parts assigned to different singers. So today, we will read from it responsively, with different parts. Follow the words on the screen to know when to read your part:

Psalm 118

*Leader: O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures forever!*

Let Israel say,

All: 'His steadfast love endures forever.'

Leader: Let the house of Aaron say,

Choir: 'His steadfast love endures forever.'

Leader: Let those who fear the Lord say,

All: 'His steadfast love endures forever.' (vv. 1-4)

*Leader: Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the Lord.*

***All: This is the gate of the Lord;
the righteous shall enter through it.***

*Leader: I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.*

***All: The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.***

*Leader: This is the Lord's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.*

***All: This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.***

Save us, we beseech you, O Lord!

O Lord, we beseech you, give us success!

*Leader: Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.
We bless you from the house of the Lord.*

***All: The Lord is God,
and he has given us light.***

*Leader: Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.*

*You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, I will extol you.*

***All: O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.*** (vv. 19-29)

It's a little hard for us to imagine what worship was like in the Jerusalem temple in Old Testament times and during the time of Christ. The few texts in the Old Testament that give us a little information are mostly detailed instructions for the priests on how to perform animal sacrifices: which animals to sacrifice when, what to do with the blood and skin and organs, and so on. There are also lists of the important festivals, when *everyone* went to the temple, but none of this really gives us a good picture of what actually happened when the people gathered for worship. Imagine some future archeologist trying to reconstruct the Lake Street worship service, but all he has to work with is a church calendar and a copy of the "Instructions for Ushers" sheet that Chris Draxler puts together. That's what it's like if we try to picture temple worship based entirely on the descriptions in Leviticus. And it's not enough.

But we do have one other source: the psalms. We know that these were sung in the temple. Sung, not just read, because some of them even come with musical instructions, which instrument to play or what tune to use. We also know that there were professional singers in the temple, Levites who led the singing and even wrote some of the psalms. One of my favorite characters in the Hebrew Bible is the mysterious Levite named Asaph, who led the singing during Solomon's day and wrote some of the most beautiful and thoughtful psalms in the book. So we know that there was music. And then we get a psalm like the one we read today, and we realize that the temple music was a participatory experience. The song leader calls out: "Let Israel say . . ." followed by a response, then "Let the sons of Aaron (that is, the priests) say . . ." followed by a response, then "Let all who love the Lord say . . ." and you expect a loud, enthusiastic response. Then, as the psalm goes on, some of the lines are in the first person singular ("I thank you that you have answered me"), which I'm guessing are sung by the leader, while others are in the first person plural ("This is the day that the Lord has made. Let *us* rejoice and be glad in it"), which I'm guessing is the response of the gathered congregation. There are even some actions involved, with stage directions. When the song leader calls out, "Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them," I wonder if he is leading a procession to the temple gates, and when he calls out "Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar," if he's giving the other Levites a cue. Maybe I'm reading too much into the lines of the psalm, but I still think this psalm gives us a much better and more inspiring picture of temple worship than the Levitical instructions on where to dab the sacrificial blood. The psalm paints a picture of joyous song, done as a call and response, by a leader and a congregation that apparently knew the psalm by heart, because I don't imagine they had hymnals.

And what was the content of this joyous musical procession? *You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever* (vv. 19-20). It was all about being thankful.

You know, since starting this sermon series on gratitude I've realized that I'm cool. Gratitude is quite the in thing these days. There are a *lot* of books out about gratitude right now, as well as gratitude workshops and seminars. Gratitude is almost as hip as Mindfulness, if you can imagine. When I googled "gratitude" this week, I had plenty to look at, but as far as I could tell it was all about how to become a more grateful *individual*, so as to improve your own life. All the techniques I found that are being taught for growing in gratitude are things that we do as individuals: keep a gratitude journal, start a gratitude jar that you fill with a word of thanks every day. All things that we do as individuals. And that's not bad. We *should* grow in gratitude as individuals. But if we take the Bible's own examples seriously, individual gratitude isn't enough.

The best and most inspiring expressions of gratitude in scripture are passages like Psalm 118, which is an example of thankfulness done *in community*. It is gratitude together.

That may actually be a little hard to wrap your head around. We Americans are individualistic by nature. We honor the rags-to-riches self-made success story. Our heroes tend to be loners (Clint Eastwood as Dirty Harry, John Wayne as anything), and when we think about “morality” our first thought is usually individual morality, not social justice. That’s how we Americans are socialized. But we are challenged by scripture to discover communal thanksgiving, so I tried to come up with a few examples of times when we actually do show gratitude together. Historically, I thought about the celebrations at the end of World War II – remember that wonderful picture of the sailor and the nurse kissing in Times Square? That was a celebration, but it was also experienced as an answer to years of prayer, and to that extent it was thanksgiving. Then I thought about a Fourth of July picnic and firework show. Sure, for some it’s just about hot dogs and a spectacle, but for most I think there is a genuine sense of awe and gratitude that we have the good fortune to be part of a great nation. But mostly I thought about Thanksgiving Day. This is a day that, obviously, is about giving thanks, but it is also a time of gathering together. We don’t picture Thanksgiving as an individual writing in a gratitude journal, but a group celebrating God’s bounty together.

And I’ll add one more: Sunday morning worship. We might not think of worship as primarily a time of giving thanks, but I think it is more than we realize. True, our prayers of gratitude tend to be pretty brief, at least compared to our prayer requests, but I think gratitude is more than just specifically naming prayers of thanks. Why do we sing hymns? Why do we stand and sing songs together? I think at heart it’s for the same reason that the ancient Israelites joined in singing the psalms. I think our music is our primary time of thanksgiving. And when our choirs and ensembles sing or play, or when Jennifer and Edna give us the gift of their music, why do we so often sit in silence for a moment, or even burst into applause? Because we are thankful for the music and how it has moved us. Why do we celebrate sacraments – baptism and communion? For more than one reason, I suppose, but at least partly in gratitude for God’s grace that enfolds us at our birth and renews us on our journey. I think thanksgiving is still the beating heart of worship, just as it was in the temple. The key element of every worship service that sends us out into the world renewed is that we have been grateful before God. So here’s my charge for the rest of this service: remember that we are here to be thankful to God. Sing and give with joy and gratitude.

A blessing to close with:

The world is now too dangerous
and too beautiful for anything but love..
May your eyes be so blessed you see God in everyone.
Your ears, so you hear the cry of the poor.
May your hands be so blessed
that everything you touch is a sacrament.
Your lips, so you speak nothing but the truth in love.
May your feet be so blessed you run
to those who need you.

And may your heart be so opened,
so set on fire, that your love,
your love, changes everything.