

“Are We Willing to Praise?”
October 18, 2009

Psalm 148
Psalm 126
Mark 10:35-44

In what I think would be an ideal world, none of us here in this sanctuary would carry the memories and wounds of having been abused as children, as so many in fact do. In an ideal world, none of the children now in this congregation, and none of their friends, would ever have to worry about how much mom or dad is going to drink or drug tonight, as so many children in fact do.

In what I think would be an ideal world, the people of New Orleans, the people of Nicaragua, and the people in and around Darfur would all have a safe place to live, enough food and water to live well, and good schools and gifted teachers to educate the children today, tomorrow, and always.

In what I think would be an ideal world, the differences among religions, cultures, nations, generations, and opinions would never be a threat or an occasion for ridicule, but those differences would instead prompt curiosity, delight, wonder, and amazement.

In an ideal world, the glaciers wouldn't be melting down into vast pools of water, and we would all see the earth as blessed gift, blessed *mother*, not as something to use and abuse for profit.

In what I think would be an ideal world, the twenty to thirty thousand children in the world who will die from malnutrition today – *today* – would all live into tomorrow, and tomorrow would be a day with abundant nourishment for their bodies and their souls.

... But we don't live in what I think would be an ideal world. Children in Sonoma and around the globe live in fear, in violence, in hunger, and in despair. Families fall apart under the strains of poverty, alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness, isolation. We have poisoned God's creation with trash and toxins. And, let's admit it, even here, in this blessed, beloved congregation, there are times when fail to live up to the ideal, times when we fail to keep our covenantal promises to love, support, forgive, and trust one another.

With such a seemingly unbridgeable gulf between what we might think of as an ideal world and the world in which you and I actually live, I think it's fair to ask whether we're out of our minds when, week after week, we sing the words, “*Praise* God who gives us all we have.” I think it's fair to ask whether we're doing anything more meaningful than simply moving our lips when we repeat the Psalmist's words, as we did this morning, “*Praise* the Lord!” I think it's fair to ask, whether we've taken leave of our senses when we speak and sing gratitude *and praise* on Sunday mornings.

And that takes us to a deeper question: whether we have any willingness at all to sing praises to God, in light of the realities of the world and of our own lives. Taking in the “real” world and how far it is from our vision or God’s vision of true *Shalom*, are we *still* willing to sing praises with the Psalmist? Are we still willing to open our hearts, discover the Spirit of God that seeks to dwell within us, and then sing and *live* our praises to that Spirit? Are we willing to look foolish in the eyes of the world by worshipping and offering praise to the God who spoke through Jesus, teaching that greatness comes not from what we have, but from what we *give* and how we *serve*? Are we willing to mean it when we sing, “Praise God who gives us all we have”? In the midst of the brokenness, the un-idealness of this world, *can* we mean it when we sing, “Praise God who gives us all we have”?

I think we *can* be willing to praise, and I think we *can* mean it when we do. Without denying the realities of injustice, indifference, betrayal, and violence, we can open our eyes to behold what we have received – grace upon grace. We can behold the amazing, awesome thing called “life.” We did not create ourselves. We did not create these bodies that work – sometimes well and sometimes not so well. We can behold the seemingly tiny beauty of the smallest of flowers and the grand, breathtaking beauty of the sunrise or the moonrise. We can behold the magnificence of creation and agree with the Psalmist that the heavens, mountains, trees, animals, and plants themselves can and should join us in singing praises to God.

We can open our hearts and recognize some of the ways we have experienced a love that gives us glimpses of God’s love. We can celebrate the loves we have known and still know – the love of a child, a lover, a friend, a soul mate, a parent, a neighbor, a dog, a cat, even a pet rat.

We can also look at the times when beauty and love seemed absent, when it seemed as if God was giving us nothing at all that we wanted. We can behold the times of abuse, violence, addiction, despair, loneliness. Remember those times and ask what got you through them. Think, remember, and see ... Who held you in prayer, even if you didn’t know it until months or years later? What was it within you that let you know that those awful moments were not all that there was or would be for you? What seemingly chance encounter reminded you that beauty, kindness, laughter, joy, and love still existed and would not always seem like strangers or long-lost relatives? When did you share the sense of the Psalmist, that, even during a time of tears and weeping, God’s promises of joy and restoration were true and trustworthy?

Look closely; look with the eyes of faith. Look at the brokenness in the world and notice the countless acts of kindness and care by countless other people. Look at the brokenness in your own life and see the countless grand and subtle ways the Holy One has guided you through. And don’t forget to take in the heart-stopping magnificence of this planet.

Do all of those things, and see if you don't discover thousands of reasons to sing praises to God. See if you don't find thousands of occasions to sing praises to the One who calls us into life, the One who calls us into communion with one another and with holiness itself. See if you don't discover that you are indeed willing to say and to sing, "Praise God who gives us all we have."

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As many of you know, it was Judy Weiner who asked this congregation last Sunday to repeat those words, "Praise God who gives us all we have." And as many of you know, Judy asked us to do that as she invited us into the joy of giving in this season of stewardship and pledges of support for the ministries of this church. And because we're in this season, I'd like to return once more to that mythical ideal world of mine.

In what I think would be an ideal world, we would all give freely, joyously, and generously of what we have and who we are. We would trust and experience that there is enough of what we need, so that we don't have to save up – hoard – our treasure on earth, whether it's in the silos or barns of Jesus' stories or in the IRA's or 401(k)s that might be more familiar to us.

In an ideal world, we would follow the ancient teachings in the Book of Exodus, so that we would pledge and give the *first* fruits of our labors to God's healing work in the world, instead of only giving from what's left over. (Hmm ... come to think of it, in an ideal world, we wouldn't even need a congregational pledge drive – but then we wouldn't be reveling in the smell of freshly baked bread this morning!)

In what I think would be an ideal world, this church would have enough resources, right now, to reach out to our neighbors throughout Sonoma and all across the world. This church would have enough resources to offer – far and wide – food, water, hospitality, love, and the very Word of God, the Word that proclaims that everyone, all of creation, is precious, suffused with grace, and bearing the blessing, image, and gifts of the Divine.

Thinking about this ideal, I realized that this is where the "ideal" and the "real" are not so far apart, after all. We as a congregation do reach out near and far. For one thing, this church has already reached out *to those of us who are here this morning*. Every one of us is here because this church and the people in it reached out in some way, shape or form. Every one of us here has a different story of how we came to be here – whether it was through a friend's invitation, a chance encounter with a stranger who said something about the church, the internet, an article in the newspaper, or a long list of apparent coincidences that all paved our path to one of those two doors [*point*].

This congregation has reached out and continues to reach out to our neighbors in Sonoma in other ways, too. We reach out in so many ways through the Thrift Shop. We reach out through the FCC/Shir Shalom Brown Baggers group that makes 100 lunches for hungry families every month. We

reach out through the donations of the Women's Fellowship and the Outreach Committee to local organizations like Meals on Wheels, the Valley of the Moon Teen Center, the Teen Parent Center, and many, many more.

And we as a congregation do already reach out around the world. With our support for the United Church of Christ's ministries throughout the U.S. and abroad, with our support for the What If ...? Foundation's work in Haiti, as it provides food for hundreds upon hundreds of children in the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, and with our hands-on work with Seeds of Learning in El Salvador and Nicaragua, we do reach out and become the helping hands and the loving heart of the Eternal Christ.

But, oh, my beloved friends, there are still so many of our brothers and sisters in Sonoma and beyond who do not know what it is have a safe home, who do not have enough to eat, who haven't yet had a chance to discover who God created them to be, and who do not know what it feels like to be a part of a community like this, where people care for one another with love and laughter. There are still so many of our sisters and brothers near and far, who are in desperate need of what you have found here of God's abundant love, grace, and blessing.

Children, teenagers, young adults, new parents, baby boomers, elders. Immigrants, natives, professionals, laborers, students, homeless people. Gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered folk, straight folk. Republicans, Democrats, Independents, introverts, extroverts, nerds, jocks. No matter who we are or where we are on life's journey, we all need a place where we will be welcomed, *where we will matter*. We all need a place where we can glimpse the fullness of God's love through the love and kindness of another person. We all need a place where we find the people who will walk with us through our greatest struggles and our deepest griefs. We all need a place where we can learn, together, how to let love be at the center of who we are and all we do, day after day after day.

And so, beloved members and friends of the First Congregational Church of Sonoma, United Church of Christ, I invite you in the days ahead to think of the blessings you have received, here in this church and throughout your life. I invite you to discover that you are *more* than willing to join your voices in praise of the One who gives us all we have, the One from whom all blessings flow. Dare to place your trust in the abundance of those blessings. Allow yourself to discover or rediscover the spirit of generosity that God placed in your hearts long ago, and let trust, hope, and love guide you as you make your pledge of support for the ministries of this church.

Amen.

©Rev. Nancy Alma Taylor
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